

Om !
Parabrahmane namah!

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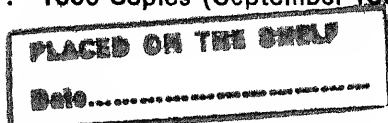
**EPISODES
FROM
SRIMAD BHAGAVATAM**

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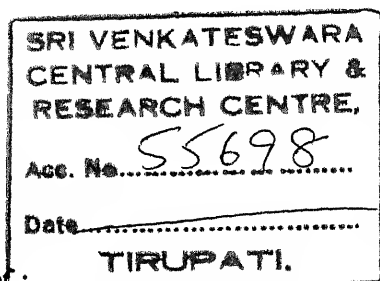
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To
Lord Sri Krishna



**who has fascinated the worldly folk
with His mysterious pranks
and miraculous exploits,**



**who has enchanted the spiritual aspirants
with His effulgent presence
and illuminating message,**



**who has charmed the ardent devotees
with His magnetic personality
and overflowing love,**



**this humble work is reverently inscribed
and offered at His auspicious footstool
for His gracious acceptance.**

C. Sita Ramamurti



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P R E F A C E

Deeply impressed with the brilliant narrative, expressive imagery and poetic exuberance of Potana's classic, *Srimad Bhagavatam* in Telugu, I was prompted to render into English Prose some episodes relating to certain Devotees of Vishnu, the Churning of the Sea of Milk, the Incarnation of Vamana, and of Krishna from his birth to Kamsa's fall. Translating Potana's epic is beyond my competence. Mine is a humble effort to follow his narrative to the extent possible and to record at relevant places my observations in the light vouchsafed to me. This is primarily an exercise meant to fill time for my own benefit. I am keenly conscious of what I am, a novice aspiring for new life; in fact,

"An infant crying in the night,
An infant crying for the light,
And with no language but a cry."

And so there is no point in giving publicity to this juvenile work. But friends and relatives, who know of my toil, are particular that it should see the light of day for what it is worth. The acceptance of my book by T. T. Devasthanams for financial aid signifies to me that the Lord of the Seven Hills has sanctified with His touch my labour of love. And so I venture to place it before the reader for his consideration.

Acknowledgments :

I express my thanks to Sri M. V. S. Prasad, I.A.S., and the members of the T. T. D. Trust Board for the sanction of financial aid of Rs. 10,000/- for the publication of the book;

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I am grateful to all friends and relatives for their interest in my labours and sustained encouragement;

I appreciate the help volunteered by Chiranjeevi P. Srinivasa Chakravarti in preparing a neat typescript for the Press;

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C. SITA RAMAMURTI

INTRODUCTION

Sage Vyasa has classified the Vedas; he has expounded eighteen Puranas; he has produced a monumental work, *Maha Bharatam*, which is universally acclaimed as the Fifth Veda (*Panchama Veda*). It is strange that even such a savant as he becomes enveloped in a gloom of cheerlessness and despondency. The divine minstrel, Naarada, appears before him, pinpoints the cause for his sadness and counsels him to get relief by working on *Bhagavatam*. Naarada is an offspring of the mind (*maanasaputra*) of Brahma, the Creator of the Universe; he is a perfect sage (*jnaani*); he knows the nature of the Supreme and His countless auspicious attributes; he is an ardent saint (*bhakta*); he clings to Him with intense love and devotion. He is a powerful propagandist of virtue and righteousness; he expels ignorance (*ajnaana*) and instils knowledge (*jnana*); he manipulates conflict between the forces of good and evil, between the divine and the demoniac propensities, and ensures victory of virtue over wickedness. Brahma himself has directly enlightened Naarada on *Bhagavatam* which Lord Vishnu has, earlier, inculcated in him in a condensed form of four stanzas. Thus Naarada is admirably qualified to impart the sacred composition to the disconsolate Vyasa, so as to enable him to find speedy relief. Vyasa with his talent for intensive introspection and extensive elucidation produces a monumental masterpiece, *Srimad Bhagavatam*. Vyasa imparts enlightenment to his son, Suka, with this devotional epic. Suka is a born ascetic; he renounces everything, even a loin-cloth (and moves about naked); and he sunders all attachments and loses himself in the contemplation of the Supreme without a moment's respite. Even such as he, is unable to free himself from the hold of *Srimad Bhagavatam*, for the simple reason that its appeal is inescapable for one like him, who lives, moves and has his being in the Lord Himself. Suka presents himself, of his own accord, before the Pandava King, Parikshit. While in his mother Uttara's womb, Parikshit had the *darsan* of Lord Krishna destroying Aswatthama's potent shaft with his disc and saving his life. The moment he was born, his eyes

cast searching glances all around to find his protector; and he was named Parikshit because of his keen examining looks. He has grown up to be a just king, an able ruler and a virtuous and devout person. He has made up his mind to devote the brief span of just a week, before his life is to terminate under a curse, to listening to the uplifting stories of the lives of the devotees and the absorbing anecdotes of the Lord's mysterious exploits and miraculous deeds. And Suka finds an eminently eligible and eager seeker of salvation to whom he can impart, with cheerfulness and enthusiasm, the illuminating gospel of Srimad Bhagavatam.

The mind, as is well-known, is the arena where the fundamental qualities (*sattvarajasthamo gunas*) are engaged in constant churning in an attempt to regain relative ascendancy. If *Sattva* establishes superiority, the mind receives the impress of truth, righteousness, nobility, compassion or some other similar virtue; the celestials have this tendency and so they cling to God. If *rajas* or *tamas* happens to be on the rise, the mind carries the taint of falsehood, injustice, meanness, wickedness or some such vice: the daityas develop these demoniac characteristics and range themselves against the Supreme. But peace and happiness cheer the lives of the devotees; while fear and suspicion haunt the enemies of God making their lives miserable. It is true that the virtuous and the vicious alike secure redemption in the end, the former by their unstinted and loyal devotion (*bhakti*) and the latter by their unmitigated and persistent hostility (*paga*). Srimad Bhagavatam impresses the readers with the magnificence and supremacy of the Lord's majesty (*ounnatya*), enlightens them on the magnitude and extensiveness of His affluence (*aisvarya*), thrills them with the inexhaustible abundance of His considerateness (*vaatsalya*) and easy availability of His overflowing love (*prema*).

Bhagavatam inculcates in us knowledge of the nature and attributes of Bhagavan. The Agamas propound a five-fold concept of the Lord: *Paratattva*, *Vyoohatattva*, *Vibhavatattva*, *antaryaamitattva* and *Archaatattva*. The Supreme Phenomenon

(*Parabrahma*) is the Great One of exceptional brilliance, the Primal Cause (*Kaarana*), the Over-Soul (*Paramatma*), the All-pervasive Spirit, Sustainer, and Ordainer of the Universe, Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (*satchitananda*).

This Paratattva expresses Itself in four luminous forms (*Vyuhas*) for the purposes of creation (*srishti*), maintenance (*stithi*), dissolution (*laya*), liberation (*moksha*), and propagation or dissemination of Vedas (*Vedapravartana*). These are called, *Vaasudeva*, *Sankarshana*, *Pradyumna* and *Aniruddha*. *Vaasudevatattva* is the expression of six auspicious characteristics in all their completeness—Pure Knowledge (*jnaana*), unequalled might (*bala*), inexhaustible affluence (*aishvarya*), inextinguishable effulgence (*tejas*), unmitigated power (*sakti*) and never-failing vitality (*veerya*). This unexcelled form is known as *Bhagavaan*. Each of the three letters, *Bha*, *ga* and *va*, indicates two of the above six attributes; and the letter *an* (ऍ) stands for the absence of all despicable and vicious qualities: thus *Bhagavan* is the One who has all the six auspicious qualities and is free from all blemishes. And He is the Supreme Being (*Parabrahma*) whom the liberated souls worship in *Vaikuntha*. The other three *Vyuhas* emerge for specific purposes, embodying in themselves any two of the six qualities enumerated above. One of these forms lies on the Sea of Milk and when necessary manifests Itself in the world as Incarnations. But the *Para* and *Vyuha tattvas* are beyond the reach of aspirants, like nectarine waters of the Fresh Water Sea and clear waters embosomed in the clouds of the upper regions. That is why the Supreme chooses to manifest Himself in incarnations and provides the devotees, who pine for Him, with opportunity to have a vision of His blessed form, and experience His gracious benevolence. Whenever righteousness (*dharma*) suffers distortion and heads towards collapse, the Lord takes birth to resuscitate it and to protect the virtuous and eliminate the wicked. His incarnations as *Sri Rama* and *Sri Krishna* are the most outstanding examples of the opulence of His affluence and glory (*Vibhava avataaras*). But such incarnations can be availed of only by those devotees who have lived in the times of their

occurrence; and they have no use for people in other climes and at other times. They resemble mountain-streams which are in spate during rainy season; but which dry up in summer, when they are most needed. There is then the *antaryaamitattva*, by which the God-Phenomenon becomes *immanent* in every atom of creation and resides in the heart of every living being. The Lord is thus presently available to those who wish to have Him. He is *within* them; true. But few have the power of introspection to discover Him within their hearts; and even if they do, they have to draw Him up from the depths to enjoy His presence. It is like digging the bowels of the earth for drawing water. It does not bring *ready relief* to the parched tongue of a thirsty man. All attempts at worship of Para, Vyuhā, Vibhava and Antaryami manifestations appear to bear no fruit, as they are beyond the reach of the ordinary run of mankind. Bhagavan has therefore graciously made Himself easily accessible to the spiritual aspirants by condescending to reside in the different forms of images, or figures cut in stone or wood, reared by them, each after his own heart, as objects of worship (*archaamaortis*). Lord Krishna has declared in the Gita : “*Ye yatha maam prapadyante taam sta daiva bhajaamyaham*” : “I shall appear and receive every devotee in the form and in the manner in which he worships Me.” Be it a sage (*jnani*) or a devotee (*bhakta*), be it a man sorrowing for lost possessions (*aarti*) or one hungering for new acquisitions (*artharthi*), God graciously appears before him in all His fulness in the form chosen by him and accepts the mode in which he offers his worship and fulfils his prayers. Such facility is inherent in this form of worship of an Idol (*Archaamoorti*). Innumerable aspirants have taken recourse to this approach and attained the same fruits as those elect few who directly adore the Abstract Supreme.

Besides expounding the essential nature of God-Phenomenon, Bhagavatam elucidates the outstanding qualities of His devotees, the sages, savants and saints, who cling to Him in love and service. Implicit faith in the existence of the Supreme, strong conviction that he belongs to Him and to none else, tenacious adherence to Him as the Be-all and the End-all of his life, absolute submission and total surrender to Him as his

Lord and Ordainer, Protector and Sustainer, fervent trust in Him as the Purveyor of real happiness, culminating in ineffable bliss — these are the essential characteristics which distinguish a devotee of God (*bhakta*) from other people. The devotee, like every other person, seeks happiness as the highest desideratum of life. But what he pursues are *not* the pleasures of worldly life, not the epicurean ideal of "eat, drink and be merry", (*loukika sukha*) — *not even* the more sublimated joys of the celestial regions as a reward for austere penances or strict performance of rigorous Vedic rituals (*paaramaarthika sukha*). He knows that the former type are mere frothy evanescent bubbles, doomed to vanish when the body disintegrates; he is certain that the latter category are equally transitory as they exist so long, *and only so long*, as the merit inherent in such laudable exercises and observances lasts. That is why an illuminated intellect, like his, has nothing to do with such trinkets of little value. The devotee of God hankers after the joy inestimable, the joy that does not reside on land or sea or in the celestial spheres, the joy that knows no end, the bliss that lasts for ever at the Lord's footstool. His sole aim, his single ambition, is how to attain it. The means to reach this destination are variously designed and practised. One approach is through the enlightened intellect, through knowledge (*jnana maarga*), which is too abstract to conceive and too tough to practise, except for the elect. A second way is through performance of works (*Karma maarga*) which involves rigorous discipline and strict compliance with Scriptural injunctions and requires a renunciation of all expectation of reward for the output — this, too, is clearly a hard option for most of the yearners. The third path of devotion (*bhakti maarga*) seems to be the most desirable choice; no qualification is prescribed for those who take to this way; all those whose minds *show orientation* towards the Lord are eligible. It matters not who they are — men, women, children, animals, birds, reptiles or insects — all, all are equally welcome to tread along this path. They need not renounce the world; they are not obliged to leave their wives and children; they are not required to give up their occupations. They may lead their normal lives without

inhibition. All that they are required to do is to tune their thoughts, words and actions to the promptings of their conscience. A strong and unwavering conviction that they *belong* to the Lord, and a conscious lively commitment to serve Him with all their minds, with all their hearts, with all their souls, are sure to revolutionise the tone and tenor of the lives of the aspirants and make them willing instruments in the Lord's hands. Their intellects get illumined with knowledge (*jnana*); their minds become enlightened with renunciation (*vairagya*); their hearts get softened with love (*prema*). The company of devotees with profound spiritual experiences exhilarates and inspires them. They live pure; they speak true; they become good; they serve others; they bring peace on earth and spread goodwill among men. They are happy; and they make others happy. This is how seekers of salvation (*mumukshuvulu*) turn into staunch devotees (*bhaktas*): and they reach the culmination in their *saadhana*, when devotion fructifies into pure love. This love is *unique*; it is quite different from love that is manipulated with expectation to receive some benefit in return; it is not the same as love that is drawn out by the pressure of gratitude for favours already received; it is distinct from love that is pushed forth by an inconvenient sense of duty or moral obligation. It stands apart — it is like the mother's love for the child; the mother does not love the child out of any sense of duty or of gratitude for conferment of motherhood or of expectation of benefit in future. It is *above* all considerations: it springs forth naturally, effortlessly, instinctively, spontaneously. The devotee's love wells up ceaselessly as from an inexhaustible fountain, softens his heart with anxious concern and solicitude and culminates in his pronouncement of benediction on the Lord Himself. The devotee feels that he must needs look after and protect the Protector of the Universe! Devotion can go no further; it has reached its zenith (*bhakti paraakaasttha*).

In this context, it is well to remember how the gopikas, love for Krishna mounts unusual spiritual altitudes. They love him because they cannot live *without* loving him; because they feel that they *belong* to him and to none else; because they find life worthless without consecrating their all — body, mind,

heart and soul — to his service; because they enjoy ineffable bliss in his presence, nay, even in contemplating his company. Such is their exemplary soul-kinship, glorious spiritual at-oneness ! The Alwars, the saintly devotees, seem to have reached these heights in their previous births after passing through the ordeals of arduous *saadhana*. They have adored the Lord with the flowers of truthfulness, righteousness, compassionateness, humility and such like virtues (*pushpaarchana*); they have burnt their evil tendencies and unfortunate lapses at the altar of repentance and wafted the fragrance of such incense before Him (*dhoopam*); they have lit the wicks of humility and purity and held them before Him to cheer Him (*deepam*); they have offered the cream of their love and devotion for His gracious acceptance (*naivedyam*); in their anxious concern to ward off the evil-eye from the entrancing form of the Lord, and in their solicitude for His well-being, they have pronounced their benediction, unmindful, for the nonce, of His strength, power and supremacy. They have become absorbed in Him to such an extent that they are unaware of their separateness from Him in the present birth. So they make no effort of their own to advance towards Him. It is for the Lord to *claim them* as His own; it is for Him to *make them* instruments to proclaim His glory. As the Lord inspires them, they sing about their mental stirrings and spiritual urges and fill the world with the abundance of the Lord's affluence and the magnitude of His gracious benevolence. In discharging this sacred mission, the Alwars frequently take recourse to transforming themselves, in their imagination, into gopikas; and holding the Supreme as the Entrancing Lover, they record in hymns their thrilling experiences with Him in union and their harrowing sufferings in separation from Him.

While on this, it is relevant to make note of the difference in the reactions of the Lord towards the aspirant-devotees (*mumukshuvulu*) and the accomplished saints (*alwaars*). The Lord waits till the cry of anguish or the piteous appeal or the eager call comes to Him from the aspirant as in the cases of the collapsing Gajendra, the panic-stricken Drøupadi, the distraught Rukmini. And then the response is instantaneous, He hastens with the utmost expedition to effect their rescue or redemption;

Strange to note that it is the devout *saint that waits* and that it is the Lord who takes the initiative and hastens to advance His claim of ownership over him, as witnessed in the employment of Vishnuchitta as the advocate to defend, propagate and establish the supremacy of the Vaishnava Cult in the Pandya court of Vallabhadeva; and in the assignment given by Sri Ranganatha to His high-priest to offer His love to Sri Goda-devi and fetch her in all honour to become His consort. Whatever be the subtle distinction between *saadhana bhakti* and *saadhya bhakti*, the Lord seems to be eager to make Himself readily available, and equally alert in effecting fulfilment of desires and in executing providential designs.

With this as the background, it becomes profitable to explore, after Potana, the workings of the Lord, as expressed in His incarnation as Sri Krishna, and in the lives of His devotees, put in juxtaposition with the machinations of demonic forces.



I - VISHNU BHAKTAS

I. PRAHLADA

The Devotee Non-pareil

Dharma, when properly discharged, brings in happiness. Dharma is of three kinds : *Loukika dharma* : that which is concerned with the discharge of duties in the mundane world, of human and social obligations, which end in pleasures of an evanescent nature; (2) *Paraloukika dharma* : that which relates to performance of rites and rituals which earn heavenly joys which are only co-extensive with the merits acquired and so cease to operate when the merits get exhausted; (3) (*Paramarthika dharma*): that which involves the observance of spiritual exercises which establish inseparable kinship with God and which secure everlasting bliss. This last one matures into loving devotion; in fact, there is no devotion (*bhakti*) without love (*prema*). And devotion finds expression in diverse ways : Narada's devotion is void of desire and passion, presents an equanimity of temper and radiates peace all around; Yasoda's devotion is intense and expresses itself in the anxious solicitude (*Vatsalya*) of a mother for the child. The devotion of Akrura and Uddhava and others of their ilk takes the form of unflinching loyalty in rendering humble services (*dasya*). Kuchela's devotion is infused with the pure affinity of close, understanding friendship (*sakhya*); the devotion of the gopikas is an all-engrossing, self-donating, passionate identification with the Entrancing Lover (*madhura bhakti*)..... and so on. Prahlada's devotion is an inborn, intuitive, uncultivated attachment that brooks no severance and culminates in complete at-one-ness with the Lord (*Parama bhakti*).

This section contains studies of eight devotees of Vishnu — Prahlada, Dhruva, Ambarisha, Rantideva, Ajamila, Gajendra, Kuchela and Narada. An attempt is made to distinguish their attitudes and approaches to the Lord and estimate their significance. And now to the study of Prahlada, the devotee non-pareil.

The Danavas are a race of giants. They have enormous strength and inexhaustible courage and irresistible powers. Affluence and power have swollen their heads with insolence and pride; they misuse their laudable talents and take delight in licentious pursuits and acts of wickedness. Their rulers, Hiranyakasipu and Hiranyaksha, have acquired notoriety for their lives of unrestrained abandon and virile hostility to celestials and other righteous people. It is good to have a giant's strength; but to use it as a giant leads to universal disaster.

Hiranyaksha perpetrates, out of sheer wantonness, the nefarious act of rolling the Mother Earth and concealing her in the fathomless depths of the vast ocean, thus causing a universal catastrophe. It is to release the Earth from this gruesome captivity that Hari, the Protector of the universe, assumes the form of a white boar and puts an end to the monstrous Danava. On hearing this news of his brother's death at Hari's hands, Hiranyakasipu is shocked for a while; and flying into rage, vows vengeance against his brother's murderer. He consoles his sorrowing mother and grief-stricken sister-in-law with words of philosophic wisdom. Moved by fraternal love and pity for the bereaved, qualities in themselves admirable and above board, he undertakes the task of avenging his brother's death, without bestowing any thought on the wickedness of his brother's criminal offence and how eminently he has deserved death for it. Rage is alien to reason and it ignores justice.

Feeling diffident that his present strength will not avail against his formidable enemy, he undertakes a rigorous penance to obtain Lord Brahma's favour. Penance, in itself a sacred and praise-worthy exercise, gets defiled at its very source for its *rajasic* element, as its purpose is deflected for dire vengeance. But such is the single-minded, unperturbed and steady pursuit of penance of the sturdy and tenacious Danava over a long stretch of time, without minding the disintegration of his physical frame and capacities, that the celestials are stricken with panic about the baneful effects of that rigorous exercise on the universe. They implore Brahma's immediate intercession to avert the catastrophe.

Brahma appears before Hiranyakasipu, pats him on the back in an approving way, expresses how pleased he is with his inexorable penance, invites him to mention his desire and offers to grant it without any reservation. The Danava grabs the opportunity thus given and seeks the boon of a charmed life — a life that cannot come to peril from any created object (man, beast, bird, insect, reptile etc.), or from celestial beings (devas, yakshas, gandharvas etc.), or during any part of day or night, or through any weapon, active or lifeless, or on the earth or in aerial region and so on and so forth. It is an extensive list of conditions of security which he enumerates in his anxiety to secure maximum protection for his life from danger. Brahma acquiesces in his request, though he knows it to be preposterous. Hiranyakasipu is elated; none can now dare withstand his onslaught; none can ever think of bringing about his death. He can now wreak vengeance against Hari, push through his huge project of reprisal and make an oblation of Hari's blood to avenge his brother's spirit. He is now sure that he will redeem his commitment to his mother and sister-in-law. The belief that Brahma's boon is a guarantee against death rouses in him all his natural demoniac qualities of arrogance, self-conceit, hard-heartedness, cruelty and vengefulness to their full frenzy. He feels that he is invincible. His will, however whimsical, is law. The world lies prostrate before him. He goes in quest of his sworn enemy but does not find him. He rates Hari a rank coward who is lurking somewhere in abject fear. His hauteur leads him a step further and he declares defiantly that Hari has ceased to exist.

When Hiranyakasipu is away on Mount Mandara doing his fierce penance, Indra avails himself of the opportunity, invades the Danava capital, routs the defending forces, takes captive and carries off Queen Leelavati (who is in the family way) for fear that the son she brings forth may prove a far greater menace to the celestials. Leelavati raises a howl seeking help. Narada intervenes and arraigns Indra of unworthy conduct. Indra explains that his intention in capturing her is to avert the impending evil by putting an end to the baby at its birth and then release Leelavati. Narada assures Indra that his

fears are] ill-founded; that the lady bears in her womb a great devotee of Hari; that it is beyond his power to kill him even if he wants to. Indra relents as he is himself a devotee of Hari and releases Leelavati. Narada offers her refuge and takes her to his hermitage. He initiates the unborn child into the essentials of pure knowledge and the springs of righteous conduct. Thus the child emerges as a born devotee of Hari. It is a mysterious irony of Providential ordination that Hiranyakasipu should beget a child imbued from birth with devotion to Hari, his sworn enemy. It is this inborn godliness which gives the child (Prahlada) precedence over other persons who have, by dint of spiritual discipline, reached the status of devotees. Even Narada, his preceptor yields to him the pride of place in the hierarchy of devotees : "Prahlada, Narada, Parasara, Pundarika, Vyasa" etc.

When Prahlada is five years old, his father entrusts him to the care of his preceptor Sukracharya's sons, Chanda and Amarkar, and requests them to teach him the Sastras and code of conduct suitable to the Danava race. The teachers wonder at the precociousness of the child; he grasps the lessons at one swoop thus showing his intellectual sharpness; he reproduces them without a single lapse, thus displaying his retentive memory. He conducts himself with perfect calm and humility, thus exhibiting his innate refinement and culture. The qualities of his head and heart, his reverential approach to elders, his high regard for women as worthy of filial devotion, his amicable disposition towards all living beings as deserving equal consideration, have astounded the onlookers. He is universally admired as the pink of courtesy (అలిత మర్యాదుడు), a model of refined conduct, worthy of emulation. But the child does not find interest in secular studies; they appear tasteless and unsavoury, barren and fruitless; deprived of spiritual content, they are a heavy burden, unprofitable and valueless.

Hiranyakasipu wishes to examine the progress Prahlada has made in his studies. He seats him on his lap, fondles him with a tap on his head and a kiss on his cheek and urges him to tell him what he has learnt from his preceptors. The little urchin,

whose very being is saturated with love of Hari and devotion to Him, declares his conviction that what makes life meaningful and glorious is the constant praise of Hari and loyal service to Him and that all other studies are absolutely worthless. Worldly possessions, wealth and affluence, position and power, however vast and grand, are evanescent; they wither and fade out in course of time. On the other hand, spiritual wisdom, even in a low measure, becomes a permanent acquisition; adoration of Hari grows into a ceaseless occupation; enjoyment of everlasting bliss, which flows as a consequence, remains a precious possession. This reply shocks the King; consternation is writ large on the faces of the teachers at this unexpected answer. The King is thoroughly displeased with the preceptors; he has never anticipated such treachery from them. But they hasten to affirm their loyalty to him; they have all along been his friends and well-wishers; and they are the sons of Sukracharya; how then can they vitiate the prince's mind against the Danava creed and code? The King's annoyance tones down. He turns his kindly gaze on his son and coaxingly enquires from whom he has received this hostile instigation. Prahlada gently reaffirms that orientation to Hari and appreciation of His glory cannot be prompted by any of those immersed in secular interests and pursuits, but they should emerge only from those anointed with the sacred dust off the feet of the Supreme Lord. There is no doubt that all the Sastras put together fail to liberate a person from the coils of *samsara*; the only hope of release rests with the effort to win the favour of Hari. It is astounding that this exhilarating spiritual exhortation comes from a lad of five summers.

But his words are gall and wormwood to the Danava King. Enraged, he forcibly pushes his son down from his lap and raves: "Here is a stripling, not full five years in age, who dares defy his mighty father and turning a slave to his sworn enemy indulges in his praise, not even minding how Hari has killed his dear uncle. No, this traitor should not be shown any mercy. This unnatural anti-racial virus must be immediately nipped in the bud". Hiranyakasipu issues a severe command to his attendants to subject his son to torture or if necessary to put an end to him, as sparing him will be a menace to the

entire race. The attendants know their master's mind; they carry out his orders without flinching; they pierce Prahlada with spears; they pound him with clubs. But the child makes no moan; he does not protest; he does not flee; he does not call for help from his companions; he does not seek shelter in his mother's chambers; he does not charge his father with cruelty. He endures the thrusts with perfect calm with his mind rooted in Hari. As each stroke hits him, he glorifies the Lord, 'Kesava'. 'Madhava', 'Narayana' etc. While he reckes not what happens to him, his loving concern for Hari urges him to provide a shield for Him from torture; and so he places his hands firmly on his bosom so that the Lord within is not hurt. Such is his devotional solicitude for Him that he tries to protect the Protector of the Universe ! It is strange that torture does not shatter his spirit, nor make him resile from his stand. He does not recant, nor does he plead for mercy. No, he clings to his conviction, that Hari is the Supreme and that He will never forsake His devotee.

Hiranyakasipu becomes furious when he is informed that corrective punishment has proved ineffective and that his son remains obdurate. He loses himself in demoniac frenzy and subjects his son to innumerable methods of cruel torture. Elephants tread on him but fail to crush him to pulp; serpents bite him but he remains unaffected by their venom. He is flung into raging fire but he is not scalded at all. He is rolled along the mountain-sides but his body remains in tact without suffering even a scratch; he is exposed to scorching heat but remains unscathed; he is flung into deep waters but they fail to stifle his breath. Fierce cyclones prove powerless to challenge his grit. Clubs and spears, swords and axes, stones and other missiles, employed against him alike fail to shake the boy's spirit. All conceivable implements of torture are exhausted; and the little boy shines with his limbs in tact, with his mind vigorous and his spirit cheerful as ever. Not a whisper of complaint, not a whimper of pain, not even a trace of cheerlessness, how wonderful ! He justifies his name. He is Prahlada, the quintessence of joy; he lives and moves and has his being in spiritual happiness, he thrives and revels in his native element of ineffable bliss,

Hiranyakasipu is perplexed at the utter futility of his efforts to turn his son's mind away from Hari. He is in supreme command of all elements of Nature, of all created beings, of all celestial hordes. His name sends a shiver along their spines. Terror holds him in dread. Death shrinks before him. But this puny creature defies his authority with impunity. Wherefrom does he get this strength to resist him? Evidently, its source lies unseen *within* him; and that is why no external force can destroy it. For the first time in his life, this enfeebling thought upsets his over-confidence in his security. Could it be that his son is meant to become the instrument of his ruin? Depression overwhelms him and flings him into the slough of despair and despondency. Coming to know of his plight, Chanda and Amarkar hasten to him and assure him that they will renew their efforts with redoubled vigour and bring about the needed change in Prahlada's outlook and attitude and that, when their father Sukracharya returns, things will automatically change and shape well for the race, the King and the realm. The King is relieved of tension and entrusts his son to their care and wholesome instruction.

But the renewed efforts of the teachers to turn Prahlada into a votary of Danava tradition meet with utter failure. There is no perceptible change in the child's attitude. He shows deference to the preceptors as usual but attaches no importance to their teachings. He goes a step further; spreads his views among his companions and impresses on them how valueless is the knowledge imparted to them, as it contains nothing that really matters; nothing about understanding the Supreme Hari and how to attain Him. He succeeds in infecting them with his own faith. The children are inspired and join him in the glorification of Hari. Thus, what started as a personal protest from Prahlada now assumes the form of a mass revolt, ending in wholesale denunciation of the preceptors' teaching. Matters are swiftly changing from bad to worse and, if not checked in time, may head towards an unmanageable crisis. The teachers inform the King of this new development and give vent to their perplexity that his own son — flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood — should so stubbornly refuse to turn away

from Hari. The King is beside himself with rage; his fury recalls to mind a blazing fire assisted by a virulent wind; it presents the picture of a trodden snake spouting deadly poison. He looks like a wounded lion roaring for instant vengeance. There is no time to lose. He decides to make a last effort to free the child from this inglorious 'infatuation' by direct confrontation.

He summons Prahlada to his august presence and charges him with treachery to his King, his country and his race. He cautions him that to brave the conqueror of the worlds, the vanquisher of all celestials, *amaras, kinneras, gandharvas, yakshas, vidyadharas, dikpalakas, vihagas, nagas* and all others known for valour and prowess, is to invite certain death to himself. He asks him on whose strength he counts for rescue when faced with that danger. Prahlada stands unruffled. With the courage that piety and devotion to Hari give him, he quietly affirms that the same Lord who has given such might and power to his father and who sustains all living creatures, has given him the strength and inspired him with courage to declare His supremacy and sovereignty; and to that Lord he turns for refuge and protection. The little child dares to counsel his father to consider that his own mind is his enemy; and that when the six formidable internal foes of Desire, Anger, Greed, Delusion (or Infatuation), Arrogance and Jealousy (*kama; krodha, lobha, moha, mada, matsarya*), the aberrations and perversities of the mind, are brought under control, there is no room for an enemy; that the whole universe then appears friendly and amiable. Advice is bitter; and when it is tendered gratuitously to an enraged person, however wholesome it may be, it acts as poison. A tyrant brooks no disobedience; much less can he condone the audacity of any one who bandies words with him, even if that one happens to be his own dear child. Demonic frenzy overpowers Hiranyakasipu.

The confrontation has reached the climax. The King declares that he has made a search for Hari several times and has not found him. He challenges his son to tell him where He is and how He moves about. Breathing devotion from every pore of his being, Prahlada pours forth his conviction that there

is no place where he is not; there is no time when he is not. He is All-pervasive; He is Eternal; He is Immanent in all creatures; nothing exists outside Him. He is the Encircling One; He is, here, there, everywhere and at the same time; He is ubiquitous. Wherever the eye of faith casts its look, there certainly He is. There is no room for doubt in this. This is the naked truth, if only his father is prepared to listen to it. Hiranyakasipu's dogged unbelief "Vishnu is nowhere" meets with a tremendous rebuff at Prahlada's firm conviction, "Vishnu is now here".

Here are father and son, representing respectively the demoniac and the divine forces, pitted one against the other—the mighty giant Goliath storming the tiny tot David. The devotee does not lose his calm and composure when the tyrant indulges in thunderous bluff and frightening bluster. Stubborn unbelief and presumptuous negation falter before strong faith and self-confident assertion. Tenacity in inflicting endless torture to extort obedience to absolute authority only meets with unshakable resistance and immeasurable fortitude, if only to establish how loyalty to the Royal within cannot be annihilated by such penal violence. Prahlada scores final triumph in this struggle, if only to prove that intuitive absorption of spiritual light and inner strength of God-vision are more than a match to crass ignorance, cursed ingratitude and haughty defiance of the very Source from which flow all affluence and power. The picture of this conflict conveys the wholesome lesson that spectacular glamour of evanescent trivialities like pelf and power fades in a trice when it comes face to face with the innate brilliance of eternal Truth.

But Hiranyakasipu will not be the monstrous giant that he is, if he does not carry on the fight, knowing fully well that he is doomed to imminent fall. He draws his reeking sword from the sheath, flashes it in the air and gnashing his teeth challenges his son to prove the existence of Hari in the pillar before him and strikes it with all the vehemence of his might. And lo and behold! out of the crumbling column emerges the terrible manifestation of Hari in the form of Man-Lion! Consternation seizes the entire court; the assemblage is petrified and stricken dumb. Instead of falling prostrate before the Lord in meek

surrender, the foolhardy Danava strikes the Lord, under the belief that the opportunity has now come to him to redeem his promise of avenging his brother's death. Even when every thing is lost, the evil-doer refuses to see the writing on the wall. His obtuseness blinds him to the reality of danger from the astounding Phenomenon of obvious superiority before him. Narahari throws him back. But the King returns to attack through sheer perversity and thus invites his own ruin. The Lord holds Hiranyakasipu in His firm grip; drags him to the threshold, lays him flat on His thighs, cleaves his bosom with His razor-sharp nails, and laps up his blood with His protruding tongue. This terrible operation frightens and immobilises the onlookers gathered there. Lakshmi, Siva, Brahma, Indra, the Devas and the Rishis recover from the shock and raise a paeon of praise, glorifying the Lord. But Narahari does not soften; His forbidding presence remains unchanged. Even the Divine Consort who is close and intimate with Him and whose influence on Him is quite considerable, now feels nervous even to approach Him. How then can any other dare to pacify Him? It is now left for Prahlada, whose mind, being attuned to the Divine Will, knows no fear and remains calm, to approach the Lord and plead for mercy. The Lord responds to his prayer and assumes His usual gracious and amiable form. Strange to see, a bright streak of light emanates from the dead Danava and merges in the Divine Incarnation.

It is worth noting how, to vindicate His devotee's conviction, the Lord cheerfully undergoes the strain of keeping himself in readiness to manifest Himself at any place all over the universe, not knowing where exactly the Danava chooses to challenge His presence. Hiranyakasipu is not aware that Hari has all along lodged Himself within his heart; he has gone in search of Hari and exhausted every nook and corner but has not found Him, even because his quest is animated by a vengeful purpose and limited to the world outside him. It has never occurred to him to look within himself to verify whether his enemy is hiding there. But Prahlada's intense faith, which asserts His all-pervasiveness and universal immanence, meets with instantaneous response. It may be noted that none can find out God, however sincere, intensive and prolonged his

search may be; God *discloses* Himself only to those who trust in Him, out of His love and consideration for them. It is *not* to demonstrate His existence to Hiranyakasipu that Hari manifests Himself but to prove that His devotee, Prahlada, is right in holding his conviction that Hari exists. Such is His magnanimous gesture to vindicate those who believe in Him. To rid the world of Hiranyakasipu, who represents the evil forces at their most monstrous and wickedest zenith, is the secondary purpose of this Terrible Manifestation. Note that while the world is cleansed of evil, not an iota of Brahma's boon to the Danava King is violated in the process of redemption. It is admirable that the Lord does not let down His agents while taking measures to counter the effects of their generous boons to unworthy persons. One last observation before the close. How elevating to the spirit is the thought that even the grossest sinner need not despair of redemption; the Lord's gracious touch chastens him and makes him worthy of absorption into Himself!

Prahlada is a devotee without an equal; and his life yields salutary lessons to spiritual aspirants.

1. Is it not surprising that Prahlada should hold the place of pride among the devotees of Hari? He is born in a rakshasa race known for its pronounced rajasic qualities of overbearing pride, stubborn wilfulness and tenacious wickedness. He cannot be credited with scholarship of the Sastras (sastra jnana) nor with proficiency in the performance of works (karmanusthana). But he has in him an abounding, unswerving faith in Hari as the Supreme Lord and abiding unflinching devotion to Him. He owes this spiritual treasure to the initiation he has received, while in his mother's womb, from no less a preceptor than Narada, the divine minstrel. Thus, his faith is inborn; and his intuitive cultivation of it has developed into love of God and culminated in surrender to Him. Thus, he becomes an adept in true knowledge without having to undergo any instruction from any quarter.
2. Knowledge without conviction becomes an empty display; performance of works without devotion becomes a futile

exercise. Prahlada shows how his spiritual equipment of faith (visvasam) and devotion (bhakti) have enabled him to stand four square against all winds of tyranny, oppression and wickedness in vindicating his clamant declaration of the Lord's immanence and all-pervasiveness, potency and sovereignty. And Hari establishes the truth of His devotee's assertion by manifesting Himself in the column as Narasimha, Man-Lion. The devotee who surrenders and deems himself to be an instrument in His hands entertains no fear, for it is the Lord's look out to save what is His own. Narahari appears frightening to the celestial lords; even Lakshmi, His consort, feels nervous to approach Him; He looks so terrible; but Prahlada moves towards Him without hesitation even because he notices the soothing mellow light beaming on him from the Lord's eye. This prerogative is reserved for Prahlada; he is the foremost child prodigy in devotion.

3. The real trial for Prahlada is not when he faces the tortures and tribulations forced on him by his father. It arises when the Lord graciously asks him to seek any favour; he reacts to this offer with trepidation; as every pore of his being is saturated with self-donating devotion, he shudders at the implied temptation, and answers with deep humility that he will feel blessed if the Lord graciously banishes all desires from his heart except the one, which he deeply cherishes, of unbroken affinity to Him in love and service. To desire Him alone (Swam) and none else, is "swartha" in its perfect form; this is the final step to reach the climax in the ascent of love. To one who achieves this goal, all other desires (pararthas) appear tasteless and reprehensible. Devotion, as it matures, assumes the form of the mother's intense love and solicitude for the child. The Protector of the universe appears to need protection; and the devotee invokes benediction on Him. Prahlada lives, moves, and has his being, in God and justifies his name as one who dwells in unalloyed bliss; no trouble, however excruciating, can disturb his equanimity; much less throw him into gloom or despondency.



I-2. DHRUVA

The child prodigy among devotees

Uttanapada is in a mood of relaxation; he seats his son Uttama, the child of Suruchi, on his lap and fondles him. Just then, Dhruva, the child of Suniti, the senior queen, arrives and casts eager looks at his father, in the expectation that he will be invited to share the coveted privilege of a similar place and equal treatment. Suruchi is quick to notice Dhruva's predicament and cuts in with an uncharitable remark that if he expected his wish to be fulfilled, he should have been born her child and not the child of some one else, and all that he can do now is to take refuge at the feet of Lord Vishnu for such good luck. Apart from its crudeness, this observation of Suruchi shows her unmasked arrogance that her child alone, and no other prince, has the prerogative of being fondled by the King; such honour is the monopoly of her offspring only. It is a stupid remark in as much as no child has an option in its parentage; Dhruva cannot obviously choose who should be his mother. The birth of a child is pre ordained. Uttanapada's passive acquiescence in his wife's callous and stupid insinuation against Dhruva appears strange and utterly unjustifiable. Evidently, he is upset with her unexpected observation and is unable to act on the spur of the moment and openly contradict her and reprimand her. It is true that he has become over-fond of Suruchi, his second flame, and has neglected his first wife, Suniti, who is the very epitome of feminine virtue and sincere fidelity. But the fact is that he loves Dhruva, the child of Suniti, as intensely as he loves Uttama, the son of Suruchi, and is quite upright and fair-minded.

He is not under obligation to honour the wish of Suruchi as Dasaratha is to give effect to Kaikeyi's demands. Dasaratha's case is altogether different. Kaikeyi's guileful manoeuvres, by which she gets reaffirmation, under oath, of the grant of the two boons (to which he has committed himself at the time of his rescue in the fight with Sambara) place Dasaratha in an awkward situation, from which he cannot wriggle out without incurring the infamy of broken troth. He

becomes helpless when his appeals fail to placate her and threats and rebukes prove ineffective to shake her obduracy. He has to yield; his infatuation for Kaikeyi brings, in its train, distress and death. It is, therefore, unfortunate that Uttanapada needlessly shows apathy at the moment; and this hurts the little child; he leaves the place crest-fallen; and when alone with his mother breaks out in groans of grief and humiliation. His father's neglect adds insult to injury and the sensitive child is unable to digest the ignominy.

Suniti has fallen from grace. She is not recognised by her husband as his honoured wife; she is not extended even the treatment that a servant receives. The King dotes on the glamorous Suruchi; dalliance with his sweet consort seems to be his sole occupation. No appeal to his good sense can prevail from whichever influential quarter it might come. Suniti is helpless. In her despair, she tells her child that no purpose is served by attempts to turn the King way from his dotage; they will prove futile. She agrees with Suruchi's counsel and tells Dhruva to turn to God and take refuge at His feet; for, such a course alone can be effective. The broken-hearted Dhruva, smarting under hurt pride and lacerating insult, moves into the forest with a fixed resolve to obtain the grace of the Lord and crave for the re-establishment of his legitimate place in the King's heart and his realm.

The divine minstrel, Narada, comes to know of Dhruva's resolve and wonders how a kshatriya child, unable to live down an insult, is prepared to undertake a rigorous penance to find a remedy for it. He intervenes; he tries to give him comfort, saying that honour and dishonour are concepts which should not be allowed to invade childhood and disturb the carefree life of sport and pastime and amusement. He counsels the tiny tot not to venture on the rigorous penance; for even the wisest sages consider that pleasure and pain are inescapable consequences of past Karma and are ordained by Providence; and that they are, therefore, to be accepted with equanimity. He impresses on the child that happiness lies in appreciating men of outstanding uprightness and virtues and in extending friendliness to equals and consideration to those who lapse

into vice. Dhruva confesses that, as a Kshatriya child whose heart is scalded with humiliation, he is unable to maintain peace of mind; yet as his spirit is oriented towards God, he piteously appeals to Narada to instruct him on the course he has to adopt to realise his ambition. Narada touches his head with his sanctifying palm; he is pleased with the child's strong determination to pursue the spiritual course; and knowing that Vishnu's prompting is its cause, he explains in detail the manner in which he has to undertake the penance with his mind steadily fixed on the Lord. Dhruva moves to Madhuvana and carries out this pious exercise punctiliously.

Narada hastens to Uttanapada's place and finds the King sunk in great depression and acute agony. The departure of Dhruva has awakened remorse in the King who blames himself for his cruel apathy towards his son and stupid infatuation for Suruchi. He confesses his guilt and expresses his concern for the little child's plight in the wild woods. Narada takes pity on the King and comforts him by observing that he does not know how great a devotee of Hari Dhruva is and how by his piety he is going to acquire a lasting position, which is inaccessible to the kings of any realms. He assures Uttanapada that his son, who will enhance his glory and make it lasting for all time, will return soon to his side to his immense joy.

Dhruva conforms to all the regulations of the spiritual exercise; gradually disciplines the body with spare diet and subsists on mere water and finally on sheer air; and he strengthens the will by concentrating on the form and attributes of Hari and shutting out all aberrations from mind. The frightened celestials, the rulers of the universe, approach the Lord and seek refuge at His footstool. The Lord graciously proffers protection and undertakes to pacify the little child whose penance has caused all this cataclysm. Hari, on whose form Dhruva has been focussing attention in his inmost heart, suddenly disappears and manifests Himself before his physical eye in all His glory. Dhruva drinks in this enchanting beauty with his greedy eyes and wishes to praise Him. But words fail him. Noticing his eager intention, the Lord touches his cheeks with His conch which booms with Vedic Sabda. A

paeon of praise instantaneously emerges from the devotee; he glorifies the form and features and the attributes and powers of the Lord; and he expatiates upon the ineffable bliss that flows from his worship and service. Pleased with the child's devotion, the Lord vouchsafes his wish — namely, enjoyment of peace and plenty during a prolonged rule over his father's domain; and when his life comes to an end, Hari confers on him an imperishable place in the firmament of planets and stars, thus giving him redemption from the cycle of birth-and-death. Dhruva has gained, in a single birth, the *darsan* of the Lord which devotees take numerous births to attain; but he is not quite pleased with the affluence he has achieved. He regrets that, as his mind is rankling with revenge for the gratuitous insult his step-mother has hurled on him, he has failed to secure the *sina qua non* of all devotees — admission into Vaikuntha and a place among His servitors. Nārada is right when he has warned him not to warp his mind with hatred; but he has failed to take note of his caution with the result that he has stupidly constricted a great opportunity to the fulfilment of mere worldly ends. The realisation comes too late; no purpose is served by crying over spilt milk.

Dhruva returns to the kingdom where a warm, enthusiastic welcome awaits him. The King is overjoyed to hear the news of his son's return; it is like a dead son coming back to life. He sets out with all his courtiers and retinue, with his wives and their attendants; he warmly clasps his son to his bosom with tears of joy streaming down his cheeks; Suniti's maternal love and solicitude find expression in an ecstatic embrace and boundless happiness. Suruchi is now a changed woman; there is no trace of the old malice or contempt; with a charming smile, she honours Dhruva with a hearty hug; Uttama is beside himself with exemplary fraternal affection and clings to his brother with reverential affinity. The people line the streets, sprinkle flowers on him and shower benedictions on their beloved and pious prince. His advent receives universal acclaim. Uttanapada decides to instal Dhruva on the throne and retire into the forest to devote himself to spiritual exercises in the last phase of his life. Dhruva establishes a reputation

for righteous conduct and benevolent administration. He marries Bhrami and Ila and has two sons by the former and a son and a daughter by the latter. His brother Uttame remains unmarried. During a hunting expedition, he dies in confrontation with a Yaksha. Stricken with grief for her son, Suruchi repairs to the forest for peace. While there, she falls a victim to a raging forest fire. Dhruva becomes indignant with Yakshas and sets out with his armies on purpose to avenge his brother's death. Proceeding north, he comes across Alakapura and blows his conch challenging the Yakshas to battle. In the fierce fight that ensues, Dhruva routs enemy hordes, killing some and wounding many. Savage retaliation follows: large contingents of Yakshas dispose themselves over the sky in groups, and rain arrows, spears, clubs and missiles, making Dhruva their single target. Stricken to the quick, the King musters courage and displays his prowess and skills in wielding the bow and discharges arrows in all directions with the speed of a whirlwind. Thus thwarted, the dispersed Yaksha hosts adopt tricky tactics, raise a smoke-screen, and hiding behind illusory clouds, hurl maces, swords, discs, spears and tridents, interspersed with stinking flesh, blood and filth. It looks as though the earth has thrown up tusked, lions, tigers and other wild animals to roam about and do as much havoc as they can. Sages and saints resent this mischievous strategy and hasten to Dhruva and counsel him to invoke the aid of Vishnu, the Protector of the Universe, who alone can ward off the disaster perpetrated by the Yakshas. Thus warned, Dhruva thinks of the Lord, reverently bows to Him, and intoning the incantation, fits the Narayanastra to his bow and releases it with all his might. The potent shaft blazes with dazzling brilliance, proceeds with the speed of wind chasing the clouds of darkness, releases innumerable flashing weapons in its unerring course and spreads havoc in the field of battle which is strewn all over with innumerable dead and wounded.

The ghastly devastation disturbs the tranquillity of Dhruva's grandfather, Swayambhuvu Manu. He arrives on the scene with a host of sages and gently reprimands Dhruva. He points out that it is highly improper for a devotee of Hari to

give quarter to vengeful ire; and execute a wholesale massacre of innocent people to avenge the murder of a brother; and that the course adopted is totally wrong and unjustifiable. He makes an elaborate exposition of the nature and workings of Providence; of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the Universe; and of the transcendental and immanent aspects of the Supreme. He expounds how sages and saints, how even Brahma and Rudra, are incapable of unraveling the mystery of His designs and purposes; and how all the happenings in the world are controlled and brought about by His potent Will. He avers that it is therefore irrational to blame the Yaksha race for the death of Uttama. He exhorts Dhruva to give up anger, which is the bane of disciplined life and cause of destruction of everything good. He counsels him to crave for the pardon of Kubera, the brother of Sadasiva and lord of the Yakshas, for the offence he has done him. Dhruva realises his guilt; he gives up anger and enmity. Kubera appears before him and Dhruva makes ample amends for his rash assault. But the Lord of the Yakshas assuages him by observing that Kala is responsible for Uttama's death (and not any Yaksha) and for the devastation of Yakshas (and not Dhruva). He advises him to turn his mind to the worship of the Supreme Lord, as that alone can free him from ignorance; and offers to confer upon him any boon that he may choose. Dhruva, whose vision now gets clear of the scales of *avidya*, is prompted to seek this single favour that his mind should be strengthened to contemplate, without a moment's lapse, on Hari and Hari alone. Kubera gladly grants his prayer.

Dhruva returns to his kingdom. With his heart firmly set on Hari, he discharges his duties with great benevolence, treating the subjects as his own children. He undertakes various sacrificial rites and propitiates the celestials and wins their favours for the good of his people and realm and thus eliminates the pile of sins he has committed till then. He drinks the cup of wholesome pleasures to the dregs during the long years of his reign, thus wiping out the merit accumulated till that time. He becomes liberated from the coils of *samsara*, relinquishes the throne and the affluence and the power associated with it, and retires to Badarikavana where he leads an abstemious life with his whole inner being set on the contemplation of the

Supreme Lord. Peace eternal and bliss ineffable descend upon him and envelope him on all sides. Sunanda and Nanda, messengers of Lord Hari, arrive; they are commissioned to fetch Dhruva (who, as a child of five years, won His grace by his devotion) to Vaikuntha, a place inaccessible except to those saints and sages and devotees on whom the Lord smiles. They tell Dhruva that he is privileged to join the 'elect' and has earned the fitness to mount the divine chariot they have brought for his transport. Dhruva feels the thrill of this invitation; at the same time, he suffers a shiver in the spine as to how he can leave behind his forlorn mother. The next moment, the cloud of melancholy dissipates as he notices his mother taken ahead of him in a separate celestial chariot. Dhruva is now at peace with himself; he bows to the sages who surround him, circumambulates the *Vimana* with all reverence and salutes the messengers before mounting the resplendent vehicle. He reaches the Vishnupada, the home of bliss for the ardent devotees, the realm which, by its own inherent effulgence, illumines the other worlds; and around which revolves, with amazing speed, the wheel of planets and stars of varying sizes and brightness. From his station therein Dhruva, the crown-gem among devotees, radiates light and cheer over the three worlds. Narada sings the glory of Dhruva, who has, under his inspiration, captivated Hari even in his childhood by his intense penance and devotional ardour and earned a perennial place of distinction in the starry firmament.

The similarity and the difference in the cases of the two child prodigies of devotees of Hari — Prahlada and Dhruva — make an interesting study. In both cases, Narada figures as *deus ex machina* — a providential interposition — to effect a salutary diversion from the course events are heading for. Indra takes Leelavati captive with the intention of putting an end to the baby she is expecting, for fear that he may prove a greater menace to the celestials than Hiranyakasipu. Narada intervenes and assures him that her womb carries a great devotee of Hari and that Indra cannot, even if he wants to, eliminate that child. He releases Leelavati from Indra, offers her shelter in his hermitage and utilises the opportunity to instil into the unborn child, a spirit of godliness and loyalty to Hari. Thus,

Prahlada emerges as a staunch devotee *from birth*, every pore of his being imbued with firm faith in the Lord. Torture makes no impact on him though he is hardly five summers old; rather, every torment strengthens his conviction that the Lord is all-pervasive, that He is immanent in every object of creation, and that nothing exists outside the gamut of his embrace and that He is unequalled and Supreme beyond doubt or question. The Lord vindicates Prahlada's faith when Hiranyakasipu challenges it and asks for proof. Prahlada thus rises in stature as a devotee without equal; in fact, he gains precedence over Narada, his preceptor and inspirer. He holds the pride of place among the *bhaktas* for all time : Prahlada and then Narada and others, even because his devotion is *inborn* and is without motivation and without expectation of reward.

Dhruva leaves his father's place, at the age of five, smarting under his step-mother's gratuitous insult and father's callous neglect. He wishes to regain his rightful place in his father's affection and wreak vengeance upon his step-mother. To this end, he plans to do rigorous penance to obtain Hari's favour. Narada intervenes; he encourages him in his laudable exercise to please the Lord and suggests a course of discipline; at the same time, he warns him against harbouring ill-will or resentment about any person. While Dhruva succeeds in earning his worldly reward, he *fails to dislodge hatred* from his heart and consequently loses the chance of admission into Vaikuntha. Though he has had the Lord's *darsan*, he has failed to restrain himself from the course of revenge against the Yakshas. On the plea that one of them has killed his brother, he has indulged in a wholesale massacre of the enemies and vast devastation of their kingdom. It is only after the exhortation of his grandfather Swyambhuvu, that he realises his folly, makes amends and turns a new leaf in his life. In Dhruva, we have the example of a genuine devotee whose lapses of hurt pride and vengeful ire undermine, time and again, the ultimate goal of spiritual *sadhana*, the release from the cycle of birth-and-death and the attainment of Paramapada. It is only after he overcomes these weaknesses that he earns the coveted reward of an everlasting place in the starry heavens. To conclude ; Prahlada *is born* with the halo of an accomplished

devotee; and establishes, through suffering and fortitude, the Lord's existence and supremacy; Dhruva, a child prodigy, grows and blossoms into a charming devotee through spiritual discipline and rigorous penance; and proclaims the glory of God's graciousness and benevolence.



I - 3. AMBARISHA

An Epitome of equanimity in peril

Rulers, in general, are dominated by ambition. They reveal a tendency to extend their dominions, to acquire wealth, to exercise power, to establish reputation. There is no end to this desire : the more they have, the more they aspire for. This ceaseless quest for worldly possessions saps their energies and leaves them restless. But there are a few Kings who feel content with whatever affluence they have and make profitable use of their talents and resources for the good of their country and welfare of their people. They lead simple, disciplined lives, assimilate the hoary wisdom and culture handed down from times immemorial, and discharge their duties with earnestness and zeal. Without ignoring or neglecting their obligations to protect their realms and their subjects, they find time to cultivate the virtues of truth and justice; equanimity and amiability, considerateness and generosity, honesty and uprightness, faith in God and love for living creatures. Their strength and prowess in martial arts keep their enemies at bay; their outstanding virtues and sterling character make their people happy; their strong faith in God and ardent devotion to Him bring them peace and enlightenment. They are the Rajarshis; their high stature, both in war and peace, wins for them universal acclaim and respect.

Ambarisha may be reckoned as one of the elect few. He holds sway over a vast inherited kingdom extending over the

Saptadweepas; he is in command of magnificent affluence. He does not yield to the temptation of extending his realm and increasing his wealth. He is an epitome of all virtues; his mind is oriented towards Lord Vishnu; and he rejoices in devoting his time to His service. He loves to contemplate on His feet; he delights in singing His praises; he rejoices in hearing the stories of Lord's exploits and sportive deeds; he exults in fixing his looks on His glorious form and lovely features and in inhaling the fragrance of his flower-garlands; he revels in the exalting and illuminating company of the Lord's devotees. Ambarisha performs numerous horse-sacrifices on the banks of the river Saraswati under the guidance of Vasishtha and other great sages and makes liberal gifts to the deserving on a vast scale. After this purificatory exercise, the King, while attending to his royal obligations as usual, gets fully engrossed in the contemplation of the Deity, consecrates every action of his at the Lord's footstool, and spends time profitably in the company of godly men.

In course of time, Ambarisha develops detachment from worldly possessions, keeps aloof from grand mansions and pleasant groves, isolates himself from kith and kin, retires with his wife to the lovely Madhuvana on the banks of Yamuna and undertakes to observe a *vrata* (a ritual exercise) in the month of Kartik. Fixing his mind steadily on Hari, he resolutely resists temptation to stray away and completes the *Vrata* with a three-day fasting followed by *abhisheka* and *archana* (immersion and worship) of the Deity and distribution of largesses of milch-cows and their offspring, decked in gold ornaments, among the Vedic scholars on a large scale.

The King makes elaborate arrangements to feed the Brahmins on Dwadasi day as that marks the grand finale of the sacred *vrata*. Just then Durvasa, a great sage of profound Vedic scholarship and intense Yogic experience and penance, arrives at the venue. The King welcomes him in all reverence, extends to him all the courtesies due to an honoured guest, and requests him with folded hands to partake of the feast he has arranged for that particular occasion. The sage accepts his invitation and proceeds to the river to have a bath and make

the usual oblations. He is unmindful of the passage of time as he gets engrossed in the performance of his rites. For its fulfilment, the King's *vrata* requires that he should break the fast before Dwadasi *tithi* passes; and there is no sign of the guest returning in time from the river. The King is on the horns of a dilemma; if he conforms to the prescriptions governing the *vrata*, he will be dishonouring the guest by eating before him. If he does not, he will be forfeiting the fruits of the whole ritual exercise. He seeks advice from the learned men gathered there as to how he should conduct himself without committing a breach in the Code. They suggest a course by which he can fulfil his dual obligations and avoid any lapse; he may sip, before the *tithi* passes, *tulasi teertha*, water sanctified with leaves of sacred basil soaked in it. The King does accordingly but not before supplicating the Lord's grace for what he is compelled to do in that situation.

Durvasa returns and the King pays him reverent attention as he extends his hospitality. But the irascible sage divines how the King has committed a breach in the Code. Rage overpowers him; hunger shakes his frame; his face turns crimson. He openly denounces the King as an arrogant self-conceited person, who has deliberately offended an invited guest by not waiting for him to join his company at food. The sage loses the power to think; he does not care to know what explanation the King has to offer; he wishes to exhibit what power he has to punish this pseudo-devotee of Hari. He works himself into passion, his eyes rain sparks of fire, his teeth gnash with a chattering sound; he plucks a lock of hair from its root and with a frightening shriek strikes it against the ground. A monstrous form rises from it and armed with a flaming spear marches menacingly towards the King, who stands unruffled with his mind fixed on Hari. The King has acquired, by his own penance, Yogic powers which are not unequal to those of Durvasa. But he does not exercise them to counter the menace of the monster before him. He does not think of retaliation; he does not even attempt to protect himself. He has made a total surrender to God and he is now in His keeping. It is for the Lord to decide what course to adopt to

avert the crisis. The ever-present and all-knowing God commissions Sudarsana, His Disc, to tackle the hallyboo created by the thoughtless sage. In a trice, the Disc arrives with its rim blazing like the devastating Fire (let loose at the time of dissolution of the universe, *pralayagni*) and consumes the monster created by Durvasa. Not content with it, the Disc pursues Durvasa with determination to teach him a lesson. The sage rushes into the bowels of the earth but the Disc is there after him; he plunges into the depths of the sea, only to find the Disc in hot chase, No place in the sky gives him shelter. In his despair, he seeks the help of Brahma to save him from the Disc; but Brahma tells him that he and Siva, the Prajapathis and the celestials, all alike, respect Hari's commands as serving the interests of the universe; and none of them has the power nor the will to oppose His weapon. Durvasa hastens to Kailasa and invokes Mahadeva's intercession. Siva declares helplessness to resist the weapon of Hari, whose mysterious powers of creation, sustenance and absorption, whose very nature and attributes and sportive deeds, are beyond the comprehension or imagination of the celestial potentates, Rishies, Yogis and other worthies who are held in respect by the worlds. He counsels him that the only course of redemption from the menace lies in seeking refuge at the feet of Hari.

Durvasa now comes to his senses and realises the enormity of the crime he has committed, in a moment of implusive obsession with his own importance, against a sincere and ardent devotee of Vishnu. He reaches Vikuntha, falls prostrate before the Lord in humble penitence, makes a clean breast of his great offence and craves for pardon. Hari tells him, by way of gentle reprimand, how closely He is allied to His devotees and how, in return for their devotion to Him, He follows them in the same way as the calf goes after the cow; and how He has not the heart to desert those who have given up wife and children, kith and kin, worldly possessions, affluence and power, pleasures and pastimes, and deemed Him, and none else, as their sole Refuge and put their strong faith in Him for succour and protection. As such close affinity, and even identity, exists between the Deity and the Devotee, Hari

directs Durvasa to approach King Ambarisha, whom he has wronged, and make amends for his unbecoming outrage against him.

Durvasa is a great sage who has acquired by his prolonged and arduous penance enormous powers with which he can, at will, dispense good or work ruin. Unfortunately for him, he has failed to establish control over his mind and check its aberrations. Filled with an overweening consciousness of his own importance, and hyper-sensitive quickness to take offence, he deems even innocent actions of others as deliberate insults and pours forth his wrath with instant impetuosity and a reckless indifference, and with a callous refusal to hear the other man's explanation or defence. It is this flaw of haste and lack of self-control, which costs him dearly; it ruins his spiritual affluence and ultimately flings him into despicable humiliation.

The sage returns crest-fallen to the earth, humbles himself before the King, clasps his feet and seeks pardon. He is shorn of his glow; he is fatigued in body; he is cowed down by the fear of the chasing Disc and gasps for breath. There is no change in the King. Ambarisha remains his normal self, amiable and courteous, kind and considerate, devout and magnanimous. He feels embarrassed; his heart melts with pity, when he sees the great sage prostrate at his feet. He turns to Sudarsana, folds his hands in reverence, extols his multi-sided magnificence in various manifestations (as Sun, Moon, Fire, Air, Earth, Firmament and as Compound of all elements or as their Source, as Time, as Universe, as Brahma, as Truth, as Sacrifice and its result, as the Eternal illuminating Cause and so on) and implores the indescribable and irresistible Weapon, the most efficacious in Hari's armoury, to relent and show mercy to the penitent Brahmin. Ambarisha declares that his appeal may be viewed with favour if, and only if, he has, through life, shown strict adherence to Dharma (righteousness), unmitigated commitment to render full satisfaction to seekers of gifts and unfailing attitude of reverence to Brahmins as godly men. Sudarsana honours the devotee's appeal, stops pestering Durvasa and withdraws from the scene.

Durvasa now feels safe and secure. He praises the King for his friendliness and generosity, qualities which come naturally to devotees of Hari. It is no surprise, he observes, that those who cling to His feet with faith and reverence get purified and consequently acquire power to enjoy bliss and impart it to others. Ambarisha prostrates before the sage and tells him that he will feel honoured and blessed, if he accepts his hospitality. Durvasa is happy to respond to his wish. He tells the King how pleased he is with him; and how his looks, his words, his hospitality, his demeanour have all a halo of sanctity about them and fill the onlooker with great happiness. The sage takes leave of the King and prophesies that his glory lasts forever and his life becomes a source of inspiration to celestials, sages and spiritual aspirants and a model for their emulation and adoption.

Ambarisha and Janaka are renowned as Rishis among Kings, Rajarshis. As rulers, they are feared and honoured even because they discharge their obligations with quiet efficiency and palpable fair-mindedness. But the main source of their strength lies in their absolute faith in the Lord and total surrender to His will.

అనన్యాశ్రితయంతో మాం యేజనాః పర్యుపాసితే
తేషాం నిత్యాభియుక్తానాం యోగక్షేమం వహామ్యహమ్.

The Lord has to keep His promise to devotees, who constantly think of Him and worship Him and depend upon Him alone. He is under obligation to protect their interests, to provide them with what they need and to keep safe what they have. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Heaven of peace and bliss !



I - 4. RANTIDEVA

Exemplar of Self-abnegation

According to their impulses, attitudes and thought-processes, people are categorised into three grades. Self-aggrandisement is the only concern of most people, throughout their lives. They care not to what trouble and misery they expose others in their mad selfish pursuits. They belong to the "lowest" category (అధమ) and are positively wicked. There are others who wish to lead happy lives without causing harm to others; their policy is "to live and let others live". They come under the classification "moderate" (మధ్యమ). They are prudent, neither good nor bad; their self-interest does not impinge upon, nor adversely affect, the lives of others. Then there are a few who can be called the "noblest" among people (ఉత్తములు). They do not live for themselves; their lives are attuned to high ideals and noble ends; they are ever ready to face trials and tribulations and willingly sacrifice their all - even their lives - to relieve others of their miseries and make them happy. Rantideva exemplifies this noble trait in all its glory.

Charity is reckoned as a cardinal virtue. It is the outward expression of a genuine fellow-feeling, which is generated in a sensitive heart by the sight of an object in sad plight. To one who has a strong belief in a loving God and who takes delight in the company of pious devotees, consideration for people grovelling in misery becomes an innate natural urge. Such a person exercises this faculty in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. He is devoid of all sense of vanity; he dislikes being seen while in the act of rendering help to others; he does not wish that the left hand knows what the right hand does. Such is his intense desire for secrecy and disinclination to publicity. He needs no recognition for his good deed; much less does he aspire for any return or reward. Usually, the person who exercises this generosity prescribes certain limits for its operation; he does not mind being liberal when the urge does not impinge on his own needs. Prudence dictates that he should not allow this impulse, however healthy and wholesome it may be, to override the minimum requirements for a carefree life for

himself and his family. But to devote himself entirely to satisfying the insistent entreaties of fellow-beings, even to the complete erosion of his own imperative needs, a person requires a rare strength of mind and a magnificent spirit of sacrifice. King Rantideva is an exemplar of such unique self-abnegation.

King Rantideva makes up his mind to lead the life of an anchorite. He distributes his possessions among the poor and the needy and retires with his family to the forest. He takes a vow of abstinence and willingly embraces poverty. He resolves to give up food and drink; he wishes to fast for forty eight days and engage himself in meditation and prayer. He completes this spiritual exercise and feels physically exhausted. He plans to break the fast with a porridge made of milk, rice and ghee and with clean and cool water. As he is about to take food, a Brahmin arrives, tells him how hungry he is and asks for sustenance. Rantideva welcomes him as an honoured guest and offers him hospitality. A half of the porridge is served to the Brahmin; and he leaves fully gratified. Just then, a Sudra appears and implores the King to appease his hunger. Rantideva is disinclined to negative his request. He gives him a part of the remaining porridge with him; and the guest takes his leave with his heart full of gratitude. Even as the King prepares to take his meal, a hunter makes his appearance with his hunting dogs and piteously craves for food. No shade of annoyance disturbs the King's affability. The sight of the famished hunter and his exhausted dogs strikes the springs of mercy. He gives away the remnants of the food to rescue them from their misery. The test for the King's altruism is not yet over. Not a minute lapses before an outcast of low birth, a Chandala, comes upon the scene, bows to the King in all humility, craves for pity and pleads that unless the King gives him whatever feed he has with him, he will die of extreme thirst. This pathetic appeal melts Rantideva's heart. He invites him to draw closer, declares with regret that he has no food to give; he has only a few drops of refreshing water and he will be glad to part with them in the hope that they will quench his thirst and save his life. He considers that no deed is more meaningful and gratifying than that which relieves a living creature of imminent peril and make him happy. The King is in the same critical predicament; he is on

the verge of death; and he is not in the least worried about himself. He is happy that it is given to him to save so many of his fellow-creatures from danger. He declares his conviction that God is his refuge; he has entrusted himself to His keeping and it is for the Lord to dispose him as He pleases. So saying, Rantideva pours the life-giving water into the Chandala's vessel.

Rantideva's firm faith in Hari, his belief in the equality of all living creatures as manifestations of the same Lord, his conviction that happiness lies in selfless service and sacrifice, and his magnificent spirit of total submission and surrender to the Lord, win the admiration of Brahma and the celestials. They present themselves before the King, tell him how they have manipulated the events to test his courage and steadfastness in holding to his convictions, and how they appreciate his success in the ordeal. He is free to ask for any favour and they will be pleased to grant it. Rantideva, whose very being is filled to the brim with devotion to Narayana, knows not what to ask for; he salutes them with all reverence and keeps mum. Rantideva earns his release from the cycle of birth-and-death and finds a place among the servitors in Paramapada.

This episode of Rantideva from Srimad Bhagavatam imparts a wholesome lesson about the value of total self-abnegation and absolute altruism. In all these successive acts of benevolence, there is no speck of vanity, no trace of patronage, nothing like the declaration of self-denial: "Thy need is greater than mine". Tyaga, as evidenced in this King, is possible only to an enlightened spiritual aspirant, who has, by arduous penance, fasting, meditation and prayer, reached the pinnacle of devotion. In this exalted position, he notices the unity of life and kinship among all created beings. The artificial distinctions of social organisation disappear, when the same crisis of death by starvation challenges the Brahmin, the Sudra, the tribal hunter and the Chandala; and Rantideva regards each one of them as an equal manifestation of the Supreme Lord and honours all of them as his guests. "Atithi devo bhava" is the regnant principle that governs his conduct. Himself on the verge of collapse owing to prolonged fasting,

Rantideva is prepared to face death cheerfully in his attempt to save his fellow-beings from a similar plight. Rantideva is a brilliant star of the first magnitude, beckoning people to a life of unsullied tyaga, renunciation, which alone leads to a lasting peace and ineffable bliss.

It may be interesting in this context to recall to mind the story of Emperor Sibi. While he relaxes on the terrace of his mansion, a dove, shaken with fright and exhausted with long flight, drops into his lap and seeks his protection. Sibi is moved with pity, strokes the bird with fondness and assures it of safety from any peril. Even as he gives his guarantee, a hawk in hot pursuit of its game arrives and demands that the dove be set free. The King pleads his inability to release the dove, to which he has given refuge, and expose it to danger. The hungry hawk questions his right to deprive it of its food. The King sees the justification of the hawk's claim and, at the same time, admits that he cannot violate the promise of safety given to the dove. So he is prepared to satisfy the just claim of the hawk by offering to it his own flesh, equivalent in weight to the dove's body. The bargain is struck; and the hawk is pleased with this exceptional chance of getting an equivalent weight of human flesh for its feed.

Sibi orders balance and weights, places the dove in one pan, cuts his flesh and puts it in the other pan but finds it to be lighter than the bird. He removes some more flesh from his body; even that, is not enough to balance the dove's weight. He repeats the process again and again and still he notices that his flesh falls deficient in weight. He wonders at this mystery, but still persists in making the sacrifice so long as his life lasts. Such is his tenacity in keeping his promise that he cares not how the sacrifice involved ends. Then the birds assume their celestial forms : the dove is Agni and the hawk, Indra. They are pleased with his sense of fairness to the hawk and commitment of protection to the dove. Sibi has stood their test; they make his body whole and crown him with lasting reputation. Sibi sets a great value on fulfilment of a promise even when it is made to a bird, a dove; he perceives the unity of life in all creatures and deems all life as precious as his own life.

Sibi makes the sacrifice of his own flesh to redeem his pledge to the dove. Rantideva has no such obligation to discharge; he is nobler in as much as he gets ready to risk his life, because of his rigorous adherence to the cherished principle of total renunciation of self in the service of other living creatures. Rantideva and Sibi alike cherish the principle of unity of life, uphold the values of commitment to truth and of preparedness to make any sacrifice, even of life, in the fulfilment of obligations. They shine as exemplars of self-abnegation and of exalted ethical conduct for people to admire and emulate.



I - 5. AJAMILA

Discoverer of the efficacy of God's name, Narayana

The story of Ajamila, as recounted in Srimad Bhagavata, is replete with wholesome lessons to spiritual aspirants as well as to people who are content with worldly life. It is an interesting study of a virtuous man who, caught in the tentacles of sensual appetites, is saved from perdition by the repetition of the name of his son "Narayana" during the last moments of his life. Repentance for past sensuality recovers and rehabilitates him into saintly life. The mention of God's name, though casual and unintentional, has an efficacy all its own; it can turn the tide of events and effect a transformation in the person concerned in a surprising manner, which is beyond the power of imagination. Ajamila is an unconscious discoverer of the potency of the recital of God's name and is one of its foremost beneficiaries.

Now to the story. Ajamila was born in a pious Brahmin family. He acquired proficiency in Vedic studies and cultivated the virtues of patience, perseverance and self-restraint. His conduct as a student was marked by strict adherence to truth,

by humble reverence to preceptors, by impartial treatment of all living beings recognising their parity, by avoidance of greed, envy and arrogance. As adolescence approached there was a change in his physical features and meritorious deeds. His looks brightened; gentle smiles played on his lips; his head was covered with luxuriant locks of hair; a fire of passion thrilled his body; his limbs hardened with muscles and his chest gained in prominence. To indicate that he was at the threshold of youth, a delicate line of hair adorned his upper lip, like the bee-line on the lotus. Spring arrived as though on purpose to create a proper environment for the youth to fall in love. The trees were clad in an array of slender shoots, tender leaves and fragrant blossoms; flowers; the outer space was strewn with a thick coat of petals snatched by the blowing wind from the clusters of blossoms on the trees; all the quarters reverberated with the deep music set up by innumerable bees intoxicated with nectar as they sucked up from flowers; parrots, blackbirds and other songsters, having drunk, to satiety, the sweet juice of fruit, flaunted their colour and filled the air with their frantic display of discordant notes and disputation. Vasanta was the precursor who prepared the ground for his bosom friend Manmatha, to begin his career of exciting passion with his flaming flowery shafts, releasing unrelenting fervour from his sweet mighty sugar-cane.

Ajamila went into the forest at the bidding of his father to fetch Kusa grass, dried twigs, flowers and fruits for his worship. On his way back home, he happened to meet a beautiful belle, an outcaste harlot, well-versed in the art of love, passionately engaged in sport with her paramour in a bower of creepers. Young Ajamila appeared as one attracted to the spot. He forgot the duty he owed to his father in bringing him with the things he needed for daily worship. He took a keen interest in the pastime in which the lover and his beloved were engaged; particularly, the seductive exposures and blandishments of the whore went to his head and made him mad. He was not at all mindful of his obligations to his father and was oblivious of the wrong he was perpetrating against his young, handsome and devoted wife. The sight of this volatile woman brought about instantaneous metamorphosis

turned the pious disciplined Brahmin into a reckless intemperate sensualist. Such was the impact of Cupid's sharp arrows on his mind that Ajāmila considered that that woman's company alone would transport him to the seventh heaven of happiness; and if that was denied to him, he could not live for a moment. He bade good-bye to Vedic lore; he found no use for the traditional occupations held sacred by his community. He recked not the reprimands of close kith and kin; betrayal of his wife's trust did not smite his heart. He chose to live with that amorous woman; he flung morality to winds; adopted any means, wicked and reprehensible, to earn a living and to support her. For years he led a dissolute life. He plundered travellers, indulged in fraudulent gambling and shirked not from any vice to amass a fortune — only to make the harlot-turned-wife, happy and cheerful. He had ten sons by her; he was fond of the last one, whom he named 'Narayana'. The boy's amiable presence, his sweet prattle, his entertaining pranks, have accentuated his father's attachment to him. Ajāmila grew old without being conscious of the passage of time. His hair turned grey; his head became shaky; his eyes lost their lustre and his limbs their suppleness; his mind began to wander; and he turned eighty-eighth birthday. He was not aware that he was approaching the end. But his pre-occupation with his youngest son and his eagerness to have him beside him, prompted him to call him by his name 'Narayana' repeatedly. When Death knocked at his gate, he saw three fierce-looking, strong-limbed messengers, armed with weapons, ready to catch him in the noose and fasten him with their cords. Ajāmila was aghast; his mind was shattered; he became petrified with fright; in his agony, he repeated the name of his son, 'Narayana', the object of his dotage during his closing years. But a strange thing happened. The servants of Vishnu, hearing his cry, arrived to give him protection. Ajāmila was not thinking of God at all; he did not intend to seek His protection, either. It was an odd coincidence that his son's name happened to be one of the countless names of the Nameless One. The mere mention of God's name, however casual and unintentional, at the time of death, had such efficacy as to summon immediate divine intervention. Lord Vishnu's servants challenged Yama's

messengers to keep off Ajamila as he came under the sheltering wing of Vishnu, by invoking His name thrice in his last moments.

Yama's messengers protested that, if their verdict should prevail, their master's writ would not hold good any longer; and that he would become a laughing-stock for powerlessness—all because of their needless, improper interference in the regular discharge of his duties. Moreover, Ajamila rightly deserved hell for all his sins of commission and omission. A wilful renegade from a pious family, a deliberate defector from traditional morality, a heartless betrayer of parents and wife, a thief and a plunderer, a guileful gambler, a willing slave to unethical passion and a wicked murderer — who else deserved hell if not Ajamila? The case was ably presented, justifying Yama's verdict. It now remained with Vishnu's servants to advance cogent reasons for their intervention. Their argument ran thus: "If parents, known for their amiability and considerateness, fair-mindedness and sense of equality, should themselves turn against their erring children, whom should the latter look up to for protection and guidance? Whatever the man who *knows* declares to be the truth becomes a law unto the world; whatever he *does* becomes an example for others to follow. Could any honest gentleman betray the trust reposed in him by a friend and expose him to ruin in a cruel manner? How could the gracious Lord, a Fountain of Mercy, ignore the call for help from a devotee who surrendered himself, heart and soul, to Him? This Ajamila has, by his recital of the Lord's name in his last moments, earned liberation from sins accumulated during myriads of earlier births. The efficacy of the glorification of the Lord's name could never be estimated: it is the wild-fire destroying forests of crimes like murdering Brahmin; it is the peacock putting an end to the serpent of sin like sharing bed with preceptor's wife; it is the sun chasing the gloom of lapses like thieving and gambling; it is the lion threatening the elephant of evil habits of drunkenness and dissipation; *Harinamakirtana* is the means to enter the realm of eternal ineffable bliss — the land which lies inaccessible even to celestial lords and adepts in Yogic practices. To raise the voice to sing perennial paeons of praise to the Lord is to g

installed on the throne of salvation—a reward usually reserved for aeons of ardent penance and performance of meritorious deeds—and to find admission into the land of truth from which all care and grief are banished. The mere mention of His name is enough to cleanse the person, even if it be done casually and unintentionally.” Thus the question that Ajamila was merely calling out his son in agony would appear to be irrelevant. An efficacious drug, even if it be taken in a casual way and without knowing its value, acts on the system and effects the required cure; in a similar way, the all-purifying name of the Supreme, even when uttered unknowingly by an ignorant man, cannot fail to exert the influence of its natural purifying quality. How does it happen that fear-stricken Ajamila utters Narayana at a time when he is almost lost but for some credit (*punya*) acquired by him earlier? What could be that saving factor except the perennial chant of God’s nectarine name in times past? This devout service rendered to the Lord earlier cannot and should not go in vain; it comes readily to his rescue when he needs it. The servitors of Vishnu effected the release of Ajamila from the noose of death; and Ajamila recovered from fright and made reverent obeisances to them.

He recalled to mind how their words were in accord with Vedic injunctions and the Code of Conduct prescribed for devotees (*Bhagavata dharma*). He opened a fresh chapter in life by passing through the fiery ordeal of repentance. He felt ashamed of his terrible lapses. He destroyed the prestige of his parents and family; he incurred the wrath of his kith and kin; he wronged his loyal and devoted wife of immaculate virtue; he set at naught all his knowledge, acquired by sedulous study over years; he flung to winds all moral and spiritual values — what for had he thus disgraced himself? To find pleasure in the company of a disreputable, volatile woman, a drunken avaricious harlot, for whom he felt an unaccountable infatuation! He now felt absolutely miserable for his reprehensible conduct. He wondered why those ghastly monsters who fastened him by the noose did not carry him to hell which he eminently deserved as punishment. He could not divine where his benevolent and fascinating saviours had gone. He felt convinced that a sinner of his deep grain would not have been

bleſſed with a viſion of thoſe magnificent beings but for ſome merit at his credit. He therefore made up his mind to devote all his time and attention to the cultivation of the virtues of truth and juſtice, purity and piety, mercy and charity. He ſtruggled to obtain liberation from *Samsara* by overcoming the *rajaſic* and *tamaſic* tendencies, by conquering the inner enemies of deſire, anger, greed, attachment, arrogance and envy, by joining the devotees of God in their acts of worſhip and recital of hymns and prayers. By a tenacious and conſiſtent purſuit of a courſe of ſpiritual diſcipline and queſt, he could reach the climax of *Yogaſamadhi*, a ſtate of ſublime conſciouſneſs and bliſs. Freed from mortal coils, he could viſion a purified ſelf (*Jiva*), the reſplendent ſervitors of Vaikuntha. He rendered humble ſalutations to them and became transformed into one of them; and aſcending a divine chariot he reached *Paramapada* and remained there ever after in peace and bliſs.

The episode of Ajamila conveys certain illuminating lessons to ſpiritual aſpirants. Even people with a good background of pious deſcent, ſteady diſcipline and ſound ſcholarſhip are liable to fall headlong into the bog of intemperate paſſion and immoral conduct. Expoſure to paſſionate erotic ſcenes titillates the ſenſes and provokes ſexual appetites. Youth are particularly amenable to ſuch temptations; and even thoſe of commanding virtue and commendable ſelf-reſtraint are unable to reſiſt them. How then can the ordinary common folk withſtand the unwholesome impact of the ſexy viſuals of the modern ſcreen, eſpecially in the prevailing climate of a permiſſive ſociety where laxity is conſidered a faſhion? But ſuch regrettable degradation need not neceſſarily end in utter ruin. There is nothing like eternal damnation even for the groſſeſt of the ſinners. Deſpair yields place to hope when the divine ſpark, long hidden under the debris of perverſe deeds blazes forth, and uttering the name of the Lord, eſtabliſhes its preſence within the heart of the ſinner. Then, he becomes conſciouſ of the enormity of his guilt. Repentance for paſt follies ſmites him hard. He has eſcaped being conſigned to hell and its torments, only to paſs through the more arduous ordeal of the purgatory of penitence and its cleaſing proceſſes. The mind reorients towards the all-forgiving, all-merciful

Lord and chants His name, praying for succour and refuge. Like the phoenix rising from its ashes, the fallen sinner now springs forth into a bright saint and takes his place among God's servitors. The name of the Lord is stronger than the Lord Himself. While on this, it is worthwhile recalling how three robbers meeting at a rendezvous in a forest to plan the strategy for their next plunder utter the words: *Vanecharamah, nadim taramah* and *na bhayam smaramah*. In all the three verbs *ramah* is common; and utterance of the *sabda*, 'Ramah', has its own impact on the minds of the robbers. Though they have uttered the word 'Ramah' in a casual manner without any thought of God, the very mention of that word of mystic power has brought about a total change in the complexion of their character; they have given up their profession of thieving and become honest men. Such is the revolutionary potency of the Lord's name! Elders observe that the letters. *Ra* and *Ma* (which compose the name Rama) represent respectively *agni beeja*, the fire which effects purification by destroying sins and *amrita beeja*, the elixir which provides sustenance of an everlasting nature; and hence the efficacy of *Rama Sabda*.

The urge to utter His name comes from His grace and reaches fulfilment in redemption, *moksha*. In this context, it is interesting to recall to mind the life of Ahalya. A pious and virtuous lady falls, in an unfortunate impulsive moment, a prey to the amorous overtures of Indra and thus proves false to her husband, Gautama. Cursed by him, the fallen woman remains inert for long, like a spark hidden under ashes, till the sanctifying touch of Lord Rama's foot rejuvenates her; she springs into her former beauty and charm, now made purer and more radiant through penitence. The Lord's *touch* has the same potency as the *utterance* of the Lord's *name*. Both chasten and illumine and raise the fallen and the desperate to glorious heights of piety and devotion. The prodigal who returns home receives ampler consideration and warmer welcome from the father; the straying sheep finding their way back to the fold generate greater warmth in the heart of the shepherd! How mysterious are the ways and workings of Providence!



I - 6. GAJENDRA

A Sinner turned Saint

When a person is driven to an extreme state of desolation and despair, he may give up faith in God and become a cynic and get lost. But when he cogitates over the adverse circumstances which have led him to that condition, he cannot but realise that he himself is responsible, if not wholly at least partly, for the creation of that unfortunate situation. The reflection flashes across his mind that God has given him the power of discretion to judge what is right and what is wrong; and that he has misused or abused or neglected that divine faculty and has brought himself into peril. If only he has heard the promptings and the warnings of his inner voice and conducted himself in tune with the Divine Will, he will not have fallen into the Slough of Despond. He has simply believed that man is the architect of his fortune and has acted in a way that takes God's assent for granted. He has committed a lapse in not recognising the value of the dictum : "Our wills are ours to make them Thine". Man, certainly, is the architect of his fortune. Yes, he can make or mar his life by the course he chooses to adopt in life. If he acts in consonance with the Divine Will, he shapes himself as a devotee, as a benefactor of the world. But if he chooses to exercise his will in accordance with the dictates of his instincts, senses and mind, ignoring his divine origin, he becomes insensitive to higher values and turns out to be an enemy to humanity. All the same, to the person who pursues his unbecoming propensities, a time may come when he remembers suddenly the purpasa of life and reverses its course and calls upon God for intervention and protection. Maybe, this turn for the better is the result of the accumulated afflictions which he has, by his own stubbornness, brought upon himself. Any way, though late he has chosen the path of submission and surrender and sought succour from Him. This is how an obdurate sinner may grow into a saintly devotee.

Gajendra may be cited as an example of sinner turned saint. The supreme lord of the elephants, conscious of his

enormous might and power, roams about the forest in all his glory, attended by a large contingent of followers and accompanied by numerous admiring queens. As he marches with his retinue, the wild animals of the forest are scared and hide themselves in their lairs; the birds take fright and lie huddled in their nests; even the insects are stifled into silence and conceal themselves; the trees quake in fear lest the herds should try their strength on them. Such is the awe in which the denizens of the forest hold him. Swollen with pride and insolence, Gajendra moves about in all his majesty and makes a display of his vast strength in playful skirmishes with his hardy companions and of fond love in merry frisks with his amiable queens. As the day advances and the sun turns intolerably hot, the elephant-lord enters a vast lake with his retinue and indulges in merry sports with his queens. His jubilant mood encourages his followers to abandon themselves to hilarious merriment. They trample the lake with their heavy legs; draw large draughts of water with their huge trunks and direct them towards their companions in torrential jets; they pluck the lotus creepers from their roots and make havoc with their soft stalks and fragrant blossoms; they strike terror among the aquatic creatures which hasten to safe retreats for dear life. The placid lake with its cool waters and sweet, scented flowers now presents a devastated look, denuded of all its beauty. This cataclysmic convulsion in the lake, caused by the rugged and obstinate elephant-herds rudely shakes the King-Crocodile from his balmy resting-place. He wakes up, only to find what terrible havoc his native domain has suffered from the intruder Gajendra and his retinue. What appears a playful pastime to the elephants results in a terrible tragedy to aquatic life. What seems a merry sport to the cat is a terrible life-and-death struggle for the rat. But the King-Crocodile is no rat. He takes the challenge and attacks Gajendra with great courage and resourcefulness. The opponents are equally matched in strength and prowess; and there ensues a prolonged fight. The crocodile digs his teeth in the elephant's foot; but the latter swings him away with a flashy jerk and moves towards the bank. But the repulsed crocodile returns with great agility and strikes again and pulls his enemy back into the lake. This

process of attack and repulse goes on indefinitely with neither scoring a decisive victory. The retinue of the elephant-lord look on helplessly in despair; his queens shed hot tears of grief. As time passes, the crocodile, having the vantage of native element, waxes in power, while the elephant, failing to reach the solid ground, gradually wanes in strength. The tide turns in favour of the crocodile. Gajendra is physically exhausted; he loses his stamina; his joints are unhinged; his vital faculties are gouged out of their sockets; he is about to lose control and faint. In that serious predicament, when his confidence in his competence to protect himself gets shattered, it strikes him, in a flash, how he has, in his arrogant defiance, forgotten Hari, the very Source of his magnificent affluence and glory. Shorn of his egoistic pride by his failure to overcome his enemy or even to protect himself, and induced by his recognition of the Supreme Protective Power presiding over the universe, he prays for Divine intercession. He sets up a paeon of glorification of the Lord, the Source and the Sustenance of the entire universe and its final absorption into Himself, of the transcendental supremacy He holds and the energetic activity He imparts by His immanence in every created object, of His indescribable and inexhaustible auspicious qualities, of His incomprehensible nature as Spirit inaccessible, of the mysterious impenetrable veil with which He invests the worlds, of the gracious considerateness with which He treats those who put their faith in him and seek His mercy, of His ready availability to those devotees who cling to Him as their sole Refuge and so on and so forth. Gajendra's praise of the Lord fetches no response. Doubt crosses his mind whether the all-seeing, all-pervading Supreme, who is said to abide with the spiritually illumined yogis and with the meek and the fallen, does really exist. It is usual for Him to save the weak when they are harassed by the strong; it is natural for Him to uplift the fallen when they are oppressed by the powerful. But he wonders why, if God really exists, He does not think of his miserable plight and does not hear his desperate wail and does not show His mercy by rushing to his rescue. This doubt about God's existence and His concern for the suffering folk is short-lived. Gajendra blames himself for his

lapse in levelling unjust accusations against God. The fault lies with him if he has failed to evoke divine sympathy for him. He has not made a total surrender to God (*prapatti*). He recovers his faith, prostrates at His foot-stool and declares his firm conviction that He *alone* is his refuge, and pleads with all the intensity of a harrowing supplicant for His gracious intervention. Gajendra realises that the gracious Lord *alone*, and *none else*, can effect his rescue and save his life. It is this declaration of his conviction that marks the turning-point : the erstwhile arrogant, self-conceited reprobate becomes a humble, penitent supplicant for succour.

In the anguish, born out of crumbling faculties, Gajendra makes final use of the little strength left still in him in raising a piercing shriek imploring the Lord's mercy. This high-pitched cry of agony travels with the speed of lightning, forces a passage through the adamantine gates of Vaikuntha, reaches the remote mansion and cleaves the diamond-studded doors of the dalliance chamber, which is situated amidst pleasant groves of enchanting beauty, and strikes the ears of the Lord, who is then relaxing with his Divine Consort, Lakshmi. The appeal has an instantaneous impact. The devotee's panicky cry upsets the Lord to such an enormous extent that He suddenly breaks off from the sport and rushes, like one possessed, to the place from which the cry has emanated. His mind is engrossed with the sad plight of His devotee; he must find him relief without further loss of time. In this preoccupation, He is unmindful of the pleasant pastime in which he is indulging at the time. He leaves the chamber suddenly; He does not leave word with His spouse as to what has caused him all that concern and anxiety; nor does He let go the hem of her garment which he has been fondling in His hand at the time; He does not summon His retinue; He does not care to arm Himself with His weapons; He does not command Garuda to carry Him to His destination. His absent-mindedness and sudden and hasty departure severely shake all His servitors. Their consternation is short-lived. They bestir themselves and hasten after Him; Lakshmi close on Him; with her, the entire contingent of her attendants; after them, Garuda in close proximity; next to him, all the

divine weapons, the bow, the mace, the conch, the disc and the sword; on their heels, the divine minstrel Narada and with him the principal standard-bearer. Why make the list long! Enough to say that all the denizens of Vaikuntha file after the Lord with equal celerity. Vaikuntha transports itself to wherever the Lord goes. Vishnu reaches the lake, sees the devotee in sore trouble, finds the disc by His side and employs this irresistible weapon to effect the rescue of Gajendra. Sudarsana needs no second prompting; he executes his mission in a trice and incarnadines the waters of the lake with the lusty crocodile's warm blood.

Is not the Lord aware of Gajendra's plight before the latter seeks His help? He knows it. How can the Omniscient Being be ignorant of what is going on in the world? He sees, but waits. So long as Gajendra believes that he can protect himself with his own strength, the Lord stands aloof. But when he is disillusioned of the adequacy of his prowess to meet the Crocodile's challenge, he implores the Lord's mercy as a last resort. The Lord, who has been waiting for this call, responds immediately and hastens to his rescue. "Knock, the door shall open"; "ask, it shall be given." The Lord takes pity on the devotee for the inordinate delay he has made in knocking at Heaven's portals. He should have sought His aid long before he has reached the point of collapse. The Lord is stupefied for a moment when the call comes to Him. Perhaps, this momentary upset is born of His contrition that He has caused needless and avoidable suffering to His devotee by His dilatory tactic of assuming indifference till he appeals for His intercession. But He bestirs Himself on hearing the piteous shriek and averts the impending catastrophe by timely rescue. Such is the Lord's immeasurable love and solicitude for Gajendra that He is not content with eliminating his enemy Crocodile; He goes to the extent of running His hand smoothly over the Elephant's released leg. The balm of His miraculous touch relieves His devotee of all pain, revives his strength and rejuvenates his spirit.

Gajendra is a personification of the fundamental qualities of *Tamas* and *Rajas* in their grossest form. He feels proud of his

noble breed; he displays the arrogance of might and affluence; he revels in the power he wields as the Chief of the elephants. Conscious of his unequalled prowess and unquestioned authority, he exhibits stubborn intemperate egotism. He indulges in sensual appetites and carnal delights and whimsical actions in a spirit of reckless abandon. But even in such a medley of elements of coarseness, insensitivity, wildness and wantonness, there lies, deep within, a particle of *Sattvic* nature that is oriented towards the all-powerful and over-gracious Divinity. No one is absolutely wicked. No one is solely good, either. Even the most virtuous person suffers from some lapse or other; but salvation may come to him sooner, even because, by his very nature, he is attuned to godliness. But when the Elephant-lord realises the futility of all his possessions and the value of surrender to the Lord, the climate becomes congenial for this spark within to blaze forth and secure redemption for him. Here is a wholesome lesson for all: there is no room for despair; there is hope of redemption even for the vilest of sinners.

As the story reaches its *finale*, the contestants—the Elephant and the Crocodile — turn out respectively to be King Indradyumna and Gandharva Huhu who, coming under a curse, have assumed those monstrous forms. The Gandharva gains redemption with the flashing chop of the Lord's disc, and the King with the chastening touch of the Lord Himself. The lesson is driven home to us that the sovereign remedy for all ills lies in His sanctifying touch; and it is up to us to realise its value and make earnest efforts to invoke His grace by surrendering at His footstool.

It is interesting to recall to mind how two other devotees, Dhruva, the child prodigy of devotion and Prahlada, the born devotee, react to the situations they have faced in their respective lives. It is only when his arrogance, born of might and power, is shattered, when pitted against a more formidable enemy, that Gajendra turns, in utter despair, to the merciful Lord for deliverance and protection. Dhruva's motivation in seeking the Lord's favour is an offshoot of a sense of humiliation and insult (suffered at the hands of a proud step-mother and a pliant father) and a burning craving for retaliation and revenge to re-establish his rightful position in the affection of

his father and his claim of succession to the throne. Prahlada is unique among devotees in as much as he has no personal favour to seek from the Lord; he is imbued from birth with the conviction that Vishnu is an all-pervasive, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-merciful God; and he surrenders to Him with all humility and reverence as his sole Refuge. It is this strong faith that enables him to encounter, unshaken, all the troubles and tribulations and fiery ordeals and challenging tests, and come through them unscathed and triumphant. There is no trace of personal vanity in this splendid achievement; there is only a sense of satisfaction that the Lord has proved him correct by His dual manifestation — as the Terrible and as the Merciful.



I - 7. KUCHELA

A Model of devotional affinity in friendship

Kuchela, a pious Brahmin, was a disciple of Sandeepani along with Krishna and Balarama. He was keenly aware of the divinity of Krishna from the days of pupilage and so cultivated a spirit of reverence towards him. Krishna honoured Kuchela as an intimate comrade, while the latter adored him as God-incarnate. After completing studies, they took leave of their preceptor and parted from each other. In course of time, Kuchela settled in life, married and reared a large family; he was hard put to supporting it with his meagre resources. An erudite scholar of great righteousness, a storehouse of spiritual wisdom, an outstanding philosopher unswayed by the vicissitudes of fortune, an amiable man of virtue in full command of his senses and enjoying perfect peace — such was Kuchela, the ardent devotee of Krishna. Poverty stared him in the face; he and his family were driven to painful straits of misery. He found it derogatory to his self-respect to seek favour from any quarter. He was content to dwell in necessity

and manage somehow to meet his obligations, to the extent possible, with what little he earned. His wife was a lady of noble descent and singular virtue; she was an adept in household management; she possessed infinite patience and remarkable endurance. Despite all her efforts, she could not minister to the bare physical needs of her children. Her heart melted with pity and was consumed with pain when her hungry children craved for food and she could not appease their hunger. The acute misery of a mother looking on helplessly on starving children could well be imagined.

She knew that her husband would not countenance any suggestion of seeking help from any quarter, however dire the necessity. But she made bold to approach him and tell him to think of a way to get over their sad plight. She put in, on a sly, a proposal that he could meet his boyhood-friend, Sri Krishna, and enlist his sympathy. She was sure that his gracious looks would redeem them of their gloomy poverty, in the same way as the sun's rays would chase away utter darkness. She eulogised Krishna as a Fountain of mercy, as a Redeemer of the woes of his devotees, as a god ever ready to stand by those who put their trust in him; she extolled his magnanimity in going to the rescue of even strangers, if only they chanced to think of him in their crises and sought his favour. She wondered how his liberality had no limits and how he would not mind offering himself, if necessary, to redeem the suppliant from his perilous predicament. When such was his gracious reaction to stray supplicants, she was certain that his response to the needs of those who worshipped him with all their minds and hearts would be much more generous, in fact, beyond all imaginable measures and calculations. She hinted that if only her husband took the trouble of calling upon Krishna, who was at Dwaraka, immense benefits would accrue from that visit.

Kuchela could easily understand that his wife's words emanated from an acute feeling of excruciating misery caused by unbearable poverty. He welcomed her proposal as it would serve a double purpose: primarily, it would give him an opportunity to pay his homage to a comrade of his youth, whom

he deemed as God-incarnate; secondarily, it might result in the redemption of the family from indigence. To meet him was in itself a blissful experience and would surely yield an auspicious result. Courtesy demanded that he should carry some gift, however humble it might be, to the great friend whom he was going to meet after a lapse of several years. Taking the cue, his wife collected some fried rice and tied it in a knot at the hem of his worn-out upper garment. Kuchela started for Dwaraka, with his mind filled with enthusiasm and spirit elated with joy.

As he neared the magnificent city, Kuchela entertained disturbing thoughts : Whether a poor skeleton of a Brahmin like him, in tattered clothes, would be permitted to enter the city at all; whether, even if allowed, he could manage to pass the palace gates, particularly when he had no means to greet the palms of the watchmen and win their hearts. But his conviction that his fortune depended entirely on Krishna's gracious looks and that his friend and protector would not let him down dispelled his fears; and he boldly marched past various palatial gates without any impediment; he was struck with wonder at the magnificent structures reared for the sixteen thousand wives of the lord amidst vast grounds and gardens; and his joy knew no bounds. Finally, he stood before a mansion with a tower plated with gold and studded with gems and diamonds; and he cast his looks within, he found, to his delight, the enchanting Krishna relaxing with his beloved Queen-Eminent on a couch of soft swan-down and flanked by beautiful damsels wafting fly-whisks. He feasted his eyes on the fascinating figure and charming features of the Lord before him. How great was that sight ! With body glowing like sapphire, with lotus eyes radiating love, with gold ear-rings brightening the cheeks with the diamond Kaustubha adorning the chest, with a lion's waist decked with purple silk, the Lord of the Yaduvamsa, the Protector of the celestials, the Refuge of the devotees, the Bestower of gifts, the Repository of all virtues, the Fountain of mercy, the Adored of all the worlds, disclosed himself in his glory ! Kuchela felt that his life attained fulfilment and that there was nothing that he desired after he was blessed with this exhilarating vision of the lord,

Even as Kuchela moved a few paces towards Krishna, the lord happened to glimpse him from a distance. He was surprised by this unexpected visit; more, he was taken aback to find his friend in dire distress, emaciated in body, clothed in rags, ravaged by extreme poverty, and pulled down by unremitted hunger over an unconscionable stretch of time. He was visibly moved; he sprang from his couch and ran in haste towards Kuchela. He gave him a warm embrace; honoured him with the courtesies due to a close relation and fetched him inside and seated him by his side on the couch. He was not content with that meagre reception. He washed Kuchela's feet with water from a gold jug and sprinkled it over his head; he smeared his friend's body with a scented ointment, made of sandal paste, musk, frankincense and other ingredients; he wafted the palm-fans to mitigate his friend's fatigue; he burnt incense and scented-sticks to provide a pleasing sensation as his friend inhaled the air; he rounded off the auspicious welcome with presenting before him camphor lights in bright gem-studded crucibles. He adorned him with garlands of fragrant flowers and honoured him with gifts of *pan*, a cow and calf. Rukmini stood by the side of the guest and wafted the fly-whisk to relieve him of the tiresomeness of his long journey. The women attending on Rukmini and others in the zenana wondered at the grand welcome offered to the Brahmin. For them it was a moot question as to what great penance Kuchela had done to deserve the special honour of being seated on the couch reserved for the lord of all the worlds and receiving his personal attentions in the hospitality extended to him. It was a unique privilege not conferred on any sage or saint at any time before or after. Kuchela was overwhelmed with ecstasy; he was thrilled and dumb-founded; he could not comprehend the magnitude of his friend's magnanimity and the intensity of his love and considerateness for him; he failed to find words to express his gratitude for the honour done to him. It is clear that God takes into consideration only the impulses and the yearnings of the heart and not the external finery of appearances when He judges and evaluates the worth of the persons approaching Him. It is also made manifest that God conducts Himself with humility when He receives a genuine devotee and honours him with His services of even the lowest kind.

Krishna was quick to notice his friend's embarrassment. He wished to put him at ease. He cleverly diverted his attention by suggesting to him that they might spend some pleasant time by recalling the days of their tutelage under Sandeepani. He started by making kind surmises about Kuchela's wife being a fit companion and help-meet and a suitable match to one of his Vedic training and upbringing. Krishna could infer that Kuchela was like him, in discharging the prescribed duties without forging attachment to wife, children, home, lands, wealth and other types of material affluence or property. For, such was the way of life adopted by the wise, who knew the relative superiority of spiritual values. He recalled how their preceptor used to expatiate upon this subject and bring out clearly the esoteric meanings hidden in the scriptural texts. He paid a handsome compliment to Sandeepani as a Brahmin, pure and undefiled, devoted to the performance of all beneficent deeds; he honoured him for his vast illuminating knowledge with which he dispelled the dark layers of ignorance; he revered him for his profound spiritual experience which enabled him to enjoy the bliss of constant union with the Infinite Supreme. Though Krishna himself was a great teacher, he conducted himself with due decorum and humility before Sandeepani to set an example to the world that honouring the preceptor was a superlative obligation not to be trifled with on any score. Then Krishna indicated how all sections of society held him as an authority in laying the code of righteousness and as a purveyor of principles governing their mutual relations; and how he declared that he would not be pleased with the mechanical observance of his teachings as revealed in the practice of penance, ritual, self-restraint, Yagnya, charity etc.; and how he would rejoice only in those who devoted themselves whole-heartedly to the service of their preceptors and in those who clung to his feet in meditation to cross the ocean of *samsara*.

Krishna then dwelt at length on an unforgettable experience shared by him with Kuchela during their sojourn at Sandeepani's hermitage. The two disciples were commissioned by their teacher to go into the woods and gather dry faggots

required to feed the sacrificial altar everyday. While they were engaged in their task, the sky was suddenly covered with deep dark clouds; a fierce gale blew over the forest with tremendous velocity; a heavy downpour of torrential rain filled the earth, eliminating the distinctions of high-level ground and low-lying areas; flashes of lightning and roars of thunder without intermission made confusion worse confounded. With the setting of the sun, even the twilight got dissipated and the advent of darkness accentuated the gloom. Not a thing was visible however much the eye strained itself. In that terrible situation, the bewildered friends linked their hands together so as not to lose company and hugged often to ward off the chill; they walked aimlessly the whole night, all attempts to find the way home proving futile. It was the consciousness of companionship that kept their spirits up, even though physical fatigue drove them to the end of the tether. To their great relief, they found the streaks of dawn breaking the eastern horizon; the unbearable silence of the forest was riven with the cheering twitter of the birds; it did not take much time for the welcome sun to make his appearance. Very soon they saw their preceptor, with anxiety writ large on his face, making a thorough search for them. He was relieved to find his disciples safe; he expressed his concern for their safety and felt grieved that on his account they got exposed to grave peril and faced much suffering; he deemed that in this way they had discharged their obligation to their master. He pronounced a benediction on both of them, wishing them longevity, health and success, wealth and affluence, well-matched wives and worthy progeny; and took them back to his hermitage, raining love and affection on them. Krishna narrated this incident and enquired if it was not vivid in Kuchela's memory as well; he added that, in fact, there were innumerable other experiences which they shared with mutual love and affinity. Kuchela butted in and averred that none of those hilarious experiences could be erased from memory; they were so indelibly impressed on it. He went further and added that Krishna was the preceptor *par excellence* of the three worlds and it was but a mere pastime on his part to conduct himself as a disciple of Sandeepani. Thus did he express his vivid understanding and firm conviction

that his friend was no ordinary human being but the very incarnation of the Supreme.

Krishna received the compliment with a genial smile and asked him what present he had brought for his boyhood-friend and class-mate. He assured him that, even if it be a trifle, would gladly accept it reckoning its value a thousand-fold, even because it came from one who loved him with all his heart and soul. At the same time, he asserted that he could not countenance munificent gifts of huge value and of Himalayan grandeur offered by people who were not oriented towards him. He declared that he would welcome the offerings those devoted to him, even if they be of little or no material value; a fruit, a flower, a leaf, even a spoonful of water, would become acceptable and that he would eagerly relish it as delicious food. This pleasant assurance lifted the oppressive burden from Kuchela's heart, namely, the thought that a meagre quantity of fried rice, a trifle, was unworthy of being offered to his royal friend. But Kuchela felt embarrassed and stood silent, ashamed to make the offer. Krishna could divine, in a moment, the cause of his friend's awkward situation. He knew Kuchela would not, of his own accord, think of approaching him for any favour of material value, of worldly possessions and prosperity; that it was only to please his wife that he undertook this journey; and that he had not the heart to oblige her by rejecting her well-meant persistent demands. Krishna wished to provide him, that very instant, with all the amenities and pleasures which went beyond the reach of Indra's affluence. Noticing a knot at the hem of his friend's worn-out upper garment, he enquired what lay within it; without waiting for a reply, unravelled it; and taking a handful of fried rice in his palm, he declared that that gift alone would give him and all the worlds complete satisfaction. Relishing the taste, Krishna eagerly collected another handful of fried rice, but Rukmini held her husband's hand and prevented him from having a second helping, saying that what he had consumed already was enough to bestow on Kuchela all the joys and possessions and pleasures in the world. Kuchela spent the night in his friend's mansion, surrounded by all the joys which cheered his heart, and rested on a couch of soft swan-down.

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Kuchela

felt as though he was in the celestial regions, drinking the cup of pleasures to the very dregs. As he rose from bed next morning, he felt that an indefinable bliss filled his heart. As he took leave of his friend, Krishna accompanied him for some distance and bade him a hearty farewell. It is worth noting that God does not wait to be asked; He gives unasked even because He reads the heart of the devotee, the intent and purpose of his visit to Him; He responds to the unexpressed wish in a measure which staggers expectation, nay, flouts even the utmost stretch of imagination. The gift is not related to the deserts or the needs of the supplicants; it only conforms to the scale of the Lord's gracious munificence.

As he wended his way homewards, Kuchela was occupied with reflections on the happenings of the previous day: He wondered what could have been the merit earned by him in previous births that enabled him to enjoy the presence of the Eternal, the Effulgent, the Merciful, the All-pervasive Supreme Lord. How gracious was it of Krishna who, unmindful of the gulf that separated him from the mean lowly Brahmin, had chosen to embrace him as a dearly loved brother and seated him by his side on his couch; and not content with it, extended to him the privileges of an honoured sage by undertaking to wash his feet with all fondness and entrusting his beloved wife with the task of fanning him with fly-whisk to mitigate his fatigue. Kuchela did not quite understand why Krishna, who treated him as a divine guest, refrained from bestowing any monetary gift on him which he badly needed. On a little reflection, Kuchela realised that Krishna must have withheld such conferment lest prosperity should go to his head and make him swerve from the Lord's service. But in his inmost heart, Kuchela held the hope that the ever-benevolent Lord, who could never keep any devotee unrelieved of his anguish, would not remain cold and indifferent to his legitimate needs.

Kuchela returned to his village and stood before a magnificent mansion which seemed to have sprung up during his short absence. The apartments with gold and silver coverings shone with the brightness of the sun's rays and the mellowed coolness of the moon's beams; the gardens and the groves

amidst extensive grounds were redolent with fragrant blossoms and ripe fruits and filled with the cheering notes of blackbirds, parrots, peacocks and other choristers; lakes of cool, crystal-clear and refreshing waters abounded, bestrewn with lotuses and tulips and other aquatic creepers, presenting a mosaic of variegated colours and a medley of fragrant smells. Numerous servants in attractive liveries and bright ornaments, beautiful belles in fine attire and dazzling jewellery, frisked about attending to their respective chores in the household. Kuchela was struck with amazement and stood there wondering who could be the fortunate master of that grand palace, which looked like a veritable shrine of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and affluence. Just then a bevy of handsome girls, resembling the celestial damsels, approached him with great humility and invited him into the inner apartments; they accompanied him singing and dancing all the way. Kuchela's wife, the mistress of the new mansion, was elated with her husband's arrival and stood at the entrance to receive him; in her fine dress and glittering ornaments she looked like Lakshmi personified. She welcomed Kuchela with loving glances bedewed with tears of joy; she made obeisances to his feet in her mind; she embraced him in her heart. Their hearts were full with the ecstasy of newly found happiness and gratitude for this unexpected and sudden turn in their fortunes for the better — an immeasurable gift of the magnanimous lord, Krishna. Words failed to communicate their joy to each other; all the same, mind responded to mind, heart heaved to heart, spirit coalesced with spirit. Such was their close mutual understanding and deep reciprocal love that there was no need for superficial display or external manifestation or verbal communication.

It is usual for the beneficiary to forget the giver, while immersed in enjoying the gift. But Kuchela was an exception to the common run of mankind. He was ever conscious of the acute misery he suffered for long in abject poverty; he was fully aware that he owed all his present affluence to the grace of Krishna; he was keenly alive to the refined gesture of cultured goodwill that gave abundantly without raking the purpose of Kuchela's visit even superficially. Kuchela realised that to give unasked and to give generously without measure

appeared to be the Lord's method. It was not the needs of the beneficiary that would determine the scale of the gift; the Lord's stature as a donor and his appreciation of the devotee's fervour and faith seemed to be in operation in the bestowal of benefices; hence they would exceed all expectation and flout imagination to conceive of their magnitude and value, Krishnaatched the packet of fried rice from a reluctant and shame-ruck friend and accepted it as an invaluable present; and in turn gave him affluence excelling Indra's. Such benevolence vealed the inscrutable ways of the workings of His grace. Kuchela who understood this secret did not stray away from the path of devotion to Hari; he enjoyed his gifts with his wife it did not get entangled with them nor forge attachments to them. Kuchela rejoiced in unbroken contemplation of the Supreme Person and was assured of a place in Paramapada among His blessed servitors.

Kuchela's story has its own salutary lessons to spiritual aspirants. There is no bar to the man of faith to approach his God; if he advances a few paces towards Him, the Lord Himself runs along to meet him and welcome him. The devotee's frail frame, shabby dress and mean circumstances do not disqualify him for the embrace of his Royal patron; rather, they make him dearer to Him by provoking His sympathy. God sees that His servant has been suffering for long; but He waits till he exhausts all his resources and finds no alternative to seeking succour at God's hands. The question whether the solicitor has expressed his wish or not appears irrelevant as the Donor is the Omniscient Lord; the question whether the supplicant serves or needs such gift does not arise as God is not sitting in judgement over the issue. If God is to function as a Judge, which mortal can stand the test of excellence? If He is to pass sentence on the merits of the people, He may have to create as many hells as there are people to punish their crimes. The moment the devotee turns to God for aid, it is God's mercy that is pressed into service; and response comes instantaneously on a scale which is in tune with God's own magnificent generosity. The true devotee is grateful for the gift; but he does not lose sight of the Giver while enjoying

His gift. He draws closer and closer to the Deity and forgets himself in the bliss of service to his Benefactor.



I . 8. NARADA

The loquiper eternal into the Infinite Beloved

Narada was known in an earlier epoch (Mahakalpa) as Upabarhana, a Gandharva celebrity. The gandharvas were a branch of the celestials; they were famous for their musical talent and skill in dance. They led carefree lives and indulged in amorous sports and pastimes in a spirit of reckless abandon. Upabarhana had a magnetic personality. His comely face and lively features, his dignified demeanour and agile movements, his melodious voice and proficiency in dance — all combined to give him an irresistible glamour. Lovely damsels, longing for his company, crowded round him and made his life a saga of sensual pleasures, pastimes and amusements. The gandharvas, as a race, were epicureans; they believed that to eat, drink and be merry, marked the consummation of all that life was meant for and of its aim and purpose. Upabarhana made a name for himself as an adept in the musical rendering of the wonderful episodes of Lord Narayana's mysterious sportive activities.

The *Prajapatis*, progenitors of the various species of living creatures in the universe, were engaged in a Vedic ritual, known as *devavrata*; and they invited Upabarhana and the gandharvas and the celestial damsels to provide entertainment to the assemblage, by spotlighting the Lord's anecdotes through their music and dance. Upabarhana distinguished himself by his renderings; but overcome by his passion for the charming damsels participating in the exercise, he left the venue in an unceremonious manner without even informing, much less obtaining the consent of, the performers of the sacred ritual. For this sacrilege of breaking off his undertaking to sing the

praises of the Lord in his infatuation for the damsels, he came in for condign punishment.

He was cursed whereby he lost his celestial status and fell to the earth and he took birth as a son of a Sudra woman who was working as a servant in a Brahmin household. During his infancy, he was carried by his mother to the work-spot; and thus he had the opportunity to listen to the Vedic recitals of the master and his disciples. He showed an absorbing interest in them as he grew up. The master of the house was impressed with the boy's earnestness and conduct; therefore, he had no hesitation to assign to him the duty of attending upon a contingent of Yogis who planned to stay in their village for four months (from Ashadha Pournami to Karthika Pournami). The young boy of seven showed remarkable earnestness and steadiness in attending upon the anchorites and carrying out their orders to the very letter. He would not think of joining other boys in sport; he would firmly resist the temptation to relax or rest. With infinite patience, he would stand at the appointed place, not minding exposure to sun and rain; he would run their errands without a trace of annoyance; he would eat, with avidity, the remnants of their food and feel gratified that it was his good fortune to have that privilege. Thus he rendered services to them with great devotion and held them in profound reverence. He heard their Vedic recitals with rapt attention; he listened to their discourses on Lord Vishnu's mysterious deeds with exhilaration; he feasted his ears with the melodious hymns sung by them in the Lord's praise. His mind was thus soaked in the nectar of His glory and became oriented to His service. Nothing mundane could divert his attention. Service of the Lord and of His devotees became his sole occupation. Under the benign influence of the Yogis, he could overcome the lower instincts and harmful propensities of *rajas* and *tamas* and develop devotion to Hari. With the advent of Karthika Pournami, the *chaturmasa* sojourn of the Yogis came to an end. As they prepared to move out, they expressed the pleasure for the manner in which the boy rendered services to them with patience and without any lapse, with devotion and without diversion. Moved by pity and considerateness, the

initiated the boy, without any reservation, into the secrets of spiritual wisdom.

The boy put their instructions into practice. He realised that all acts when consecrated to the Lord would cease to bind; *Karma* thus rendered would become *Yoga*. And *Yoga* would inspire knowledge of the Lord (*Jnana*) and lead to the cultivation of devotion (*bhakti*). Constant contemplation on the form and attributes of Vishnu and perennial chant of Pranava and His names would make the devotee reach the heights of equanimity (*samyagdarsana*), seen from which all things would lose their differences and appear equal. As the boy pursued this course of spiritual discipline, the Lord Himself was graciously pleased to endow him with knowledge about Himself and thus enabled him to grow in stature as a devotee.

But he could not leave his mother as he was very much attached to her. After discharging her duties in the Brahmin household, his mother, though tired, would express concern for him, feed him with affection, kiss him on the cheeks, fondle the ringlet hair on his forehead, embrace him with fondness, and put forth every effort to make him happy. The boy knew how illusive this pleasure was; and yet he could not pull himself out of it. Some weeks passed. One night as his mother went into the cattle-shed to milk a cow, she was bitten by a venomous serpent as she happened to tread upon it in the dark. She collapsed on the ground, struggled for a time in agony; and as the poison worked and spread over her body, she met with death in a short time. The boy was a witness to this harrowing scene; but he was not upset by attachment to his beloved mother. He found in this tragic occurrence an opportunity to free himself from worldly cares and devote his entire time to the pursuit of spiritual aspirations. He left home and proceeded northward, passed by cities, towns, villages, hamlets and tribal settlements, wild woods and groves, and lakes of clear waters abounding in fragrant lotuses. He reached the recesses of forests infested with wild animals and frightful birds and huge serpents. He entertained no fear. He took a bath in the cool waters of a flowing river and felt refreshed. He selected a shady bower at the foot of an *Aswatthavriksha* and sat

down to contemplate on the form of Hari as crystallised on his mind by the accounts and reports of sages he came across. He had an exhilarating experience; the Lord whose feet he was adoring in his mind seemed to present Himself before him; tears of joy trickled down his cheeks; his hairs stood on end; he opened his eyes; but the vision seemed to melt away. The agony of disappointment did not drive him to despair; rather, it urged him to renew his effort to recapture the blessed vision. The boy then heard a majestic Voice which declared that he would not be able to see the Lord in his present life; but that his aspiration to attain Him would not become infructuous; it was only to encourage him in his pursuit that He had given him a glimpse of His manifestation; and that the devotion he had already cultivated and developed would not be lost but would get fructified in his next birth when, under the Lord's grace, he would emerge as His staunch devotee. The Heavenly Voice further declared that after a thousand epochs the whole world would undergo a total dissolution and that during its re-creation the boy would be born, shorn of all sins and lapses, and with his devotional fervour undefiled and unmitigated, and that he would acquire universal acclaim for his stature as a devotee of the Supreme Lord.

The boy bowed his head and joined his hands in humble salutation and gratitude for His gracious mercy. He overcame desire (*kama*); he expelled anger (*krodha*); he extinguished greed (*lobha*); he relinquished all types of attachment and delusion (*moha*); he annihilated arrogance (*mada*) and he destroyed envy and jealousy (*matsara*). He cultivated the habit of chanting the thousand names of the Nameless Supreme; he spent hours in ruminating over the anecdotes of the Lord's mysterious manifestations and miraculous deeds. With a mind chastened and contented, he remained steadfast in the contemplation of the Deity, Absolute and Perfect. In course of time he felt the approach of Death; he then gave up the body which was composed of the five elements and was a product of the pile of Karma; he entered, by the grace of Hari, into the subtle body comprised of the pure quintessence of *Sattwaguna*. When the devastating Deluge (*Pralaya*) overtook the Universe; Brahmā the Creator, was intending to enter the Supreme Person (w

lay stretched on the turbulent waters of the ocean) for his prolonged rest; the boy lost no opportunity in entering Brahma through the nostril along with the breath inhaled by him. There he lay during the aeons of Brahma's relaxation. But when Brahma awoke and began the re-creation of the Universe, the boy emerged out of his vital airs along with Marichi and other illustrious Rishis. He chose the life of rigorous celibacy, Gifted with a melodious voice and with a musical instrument (*mahati*) which had an inherent capacity of producing divine music, he rejoiced in extolling the nature, attributes and sportive deeds (*Leelas*) of the Supreme Hari. The boy thus became the Divine Minstrel, under the name of Narada; and the prophecy of the Heavenly Voice thus fulfilled itself. Chanting the Lord's names and singing about His glories and propagating the message of His love became the sole occupation of his life.

It was in the course of discharging his self-appointed mission of promoting the cult of Bhakti, that he came across Daksha's sons, Haryasvas, who were engaged, at their father's instance, in the performance of a penance for the purpose of procreating the human race. The venue of the penance was the plot near the lake, Narayanasaras, situated close to the confluence of Sindhu river and the Western Sea. A dip in the lake had a cleansing effect on the body and the mind; the place had a great sanctity and a congenial climate for carrying on penance in undisturbed tranquillity. As Daksha's sons set upon their task, Narada came to them and exhorted them to give it up as there was nothing great in becoming progenitors of the race; on the other hand, there was great harm, in as much as they would fall into the abyss of ignorance. And then, they would not understand the real nature of self; they would not earn redemption from the cycle of birth-and-death; they would be cast into the prison of cares and anxieties; they would be tossed up in pleasures and hurled down in sorrows and find no peace. Narada suggested that they should take to the pursuit of devotion to Hari which would lead them to Paramapada where they could enjoy eternal peace and ineffable bliss. Haryasvas were convinced that the course suggested by Narada was the right one to adopt and gave up the penance enjoined upon them by their father. Daksha felt disappointed

and miserable that his sons ignored his injunction and preferred the great path of devotion to Hari under Narada's influence.

Brahma appeared before Daksha and consoled him and rejuvenated his spirits. On his suggestion, Daksha raised another contingent of worthy sons in the hope that they would fulfil his aspiration. Knowing their father's mind, the Sabalasvas, repaired to the same venue to which their elder brothers went, and began a rigorous penance with their minds steadily fixed on Hari, the Parabrahma, the very Source of all Brahmanana. They spared no effort to please the Supreme Lord. They subjected themselves to any ordeal in discharging their filial duty. They stood on tip-toe; raised their hands over their heads and joined them in salutation; fixed their looks steadily on the sky; exposed themselves to the rigours of changing weather; fed on air for sometime and later gave up even that sustenance. Such was the tenacity and steadfastness they showed in passing through the ordeal — all for the sake of having their father's wish fulfilled. The whole world shook to its foundations; the celestials were aghast with fright. Narada arrived to avert the impending catastrophe. He pleaded with them that they should follow the example set by their elder brothers; such a course should be deemed a special fraternal obligation worthy of adoption. He explained the banal aspects of total involvement in worldly affairs which their penance necessarily connoted; and expounded, by way of contrast, the excellence of the joys of spiritual attainment. Like their elders before them, the Sabalasvas, renounced the ritual code (*karmakanda*) and accepted the devotional course (*Bhaktimarga*). Thus Daksha's purpose was shattered a second time by the intervention of Narada. He took umbrage with the Divine Minstrel for his impertinent meddling. He went up to him in rage, charged him with treacherously diverting the young innocent minds from the course laid down by him for them. He declared that, Narada was guilty of an unforgivable offence, as he misled his children and diverted them from discharging their duties to celestials (*devas*) and manes (*pitrus*) as they were induced to relinquish the Vedic rituals. Daksha cursed Narada that he would find no steady residence anywhere in the three worlds; that he should have to roam about without rest; that he could

never cement friendships but thrive on causing conflicts only; that, thereafter, none would acquire knowledge through instruction but only through experience. Narada remained unruffled during the pronouncement of this curse; and then said, "let it be so." One who could accept without demur and with perfect calm such a grave curse would be regarded as a magnanimous person, a *jnani* who was beyond the reach of praise or resentment (*Sarvateetudu*).

Narada has surrendered himself into God's keeping; he claims no individuality, no independence for himself; he is an instrument in His hands, to be used, as and when He pleases, to serve His purposes. No curse could affect such a devotee, dedicated as he is to the service of the Lord. In fact, what Daksha has meant as a curse turns out to be a blessing to Narada and the world. Narada needs no resting place in any of the worlds; for, he finds habitation in God Himself. He is constantly on the move, and consequently in a position to collect and assess, at first hand, news of happenings in the entire universe. He is condemned to cause conflicts — yes, he provokes confrontation between the forces of evil and of good with an uncanny sense of timing, which turns out propitious for the triumph of the latter and thus proves beneficial to the world. It is said that raising feuds is Narada's staple diet (*kalahabhajana*). It is good that he does not starve. For, with every feed of his, he contributes to the establishment of truth and righteousness and peace and happiness in the entire world. Thus, he is a universal benefactor. Again, the pronouncement that no one can acquire knowledge through mere instruction but only through experience is no curse at all, for knowledge derived from teaching may, at best, be an intellectual equipment; but that assimilated through experience becomes a spiritual accomplishment.

A little reflection on Narada's life-history yields certain wholesome lessons. A tendency to sensual pleasures is fraught with disaster, even for a *gandharva*, when he is engaged in the performance of a sacred duty of singing the Lord's praises during a ceremonial observance. Any inalertness or lack of self-restraint on such occasions becomes an uncondonable

lapse and invites condign punishment. Hence the loss of celestial lustre and heavenly pleasures and a precipitous fall to the earth and birth in a family of indigent circumstances and of low caste. But to one who is aware of the reason for his sudden transformation, the course to adopt in the present birth is clear. The child develops a new orientation to life, an entirely different outlook. Self-indulgence is altogether taboo; even the normal child's fondness for innocent sport is eschewed; punctilious performance of tasks with infinite patience becomes an absorbing passion; consuming the left-offs of anchorites' food with avidity and pleasure seems to be a coveted pleasure; listening to the Vedic recitals and discourses on God's manifestations and mysterious deeds lends a spiritual glow to the tone and tenor of life. The boy of seven earns the benediction of the Yogis and turns into a devotee in quest of the Supreme. Does his caste (sudra) come in the way of his receiving spiritual enlightenment? To the godly, there is only one caste, the caste of humankind. To the noble-minded, the whole world is akin, a single family (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*). Again, to the aspirant intent upon spiritual attainment, obstacles are mere stepping stones to success. No frustration, no despair. The all-seeing God hastens to his help, blesses him with a glimpse of Himself, reinvigorates hope and strengthens conviction in the devotee and assures redemption. If a devotee takes one step forward to Him, God rushes ten paces towards him in eagerness to claim him. Narada becomes the Lord's beloved son, in whom He is well pleased. Look at the transition from the glamorous, self-indulgent gandharva of celestial status to the humble, patient, servant-boy treading the earth with head lifted up to heaven, treating the mundane pleasures as mere baubles of no value and aspiring for a life of spiritual light and finally to the status of a sage and devotee par excellence. Narada is a savant, a jnani; he expels ignorance (*ajnana*) in others and imparts spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) to them and thus justifies his name. Narada is a devout bhakta; he lives, moves and has his very being in the Lord Himself; he revels in song as the Divine Minstrel; he rejoices in self-enjoined mission as a promoter and propagandist of good; and he strives to establish Heaven on earth. Inscrutable are the designs of God and the workings of Providence!

There is no end to Narada's explorations into the profundities of the nature of the Supreme Being, There are no limits to his lucid expositions of the multifarious facets of the Lord's innumerable auspicious attributes. There is no break to the spontaneous upsurge of melodious rhapsodies of soulful praise and glorification from the inexhaustible fount of his all-absorbing devotion. The hundred-stringed *mahati* registers every beat of his pulse; echoes ever stir of his heart; records every passing thought of his mind; responds to every burst of his emotion; and simultaneously synchronises them into a ravishing melody, unique alike in voluminous boom and cascading alto. Narada thus stands apart and alone like the star in the meridian — as bard and minstrel, as inquirer and illuminator, as inspirer and propagator of spiritual wisdom and devotional fervour. A universal favourite with celestials and demons alike, relied upon and agreeably welcomed everywhere as an honoured guest and guide, Narada rambles over the worlds, carrying out his self-imposed mission of establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. To him we render our salutations in all humility and reverence.



II - DEVAS AND DAITYAS

II - 9. KSHEERASAGARA MATHANA

Churning of the Ocean of Milk

(i) Indra's strategy :

The Daityas grow in stature and might under Bali. The Devas are unable to withstand their onslaught. They run helter skelter for their very lives. They repair to Brahma, explain their sad plight and seek his intervention. He thinks that the Supreme Lord alone can provide protection and leads them to Vaikuntha. Not finding Him there, Brahma sings invocations, praises and implores His mercy. Vishnu manifests Himself as blazing Fire with the effulgence of a thousand suns. Indra and his retinue, dazzled and awe-struck, remain mute and perplexed before this terrible Phenomenon. Vishnu takes pity on His devotees and assumes the amiable human form with a fascinating smile playing on his coral lips. He is dressed in purple silk, adorned with ornaments of gold and diamonds, decked with fragrant flower-garlands, and equipped with the divine weapons — the conch, the disc, the mace, the sword, the bow and arrows. The Devas prostrate before Him in all reverence and crave for His protection. The Lord tells them that in the circumstances prevailing then, they have no chance of gaining ascendancy over the powerful Daityas. He has conceived of a strategy by which they can fortify themselves with life eternal. To this end, they have to churn the Ocean of Milk with Mount Mandara for the Churning-rod and Serpent Vasuki for the binding Cord, and obtain the vessel of Nectar, the divine elixir which, when tasted, guarantees eternal life. He advises them that they should lie low for the time being, enlist the cooperation and help of Daityas in this stupendous task; that they should not be dissipated with some initial reverses but should pursue the exercise with tenacity. He further assures them of His help in overcoming obstacles and in securing for them the desired nectar to the exclusion of the Daitya participants.

Indra is a shrewd statesman. He contrives his moves with great adroitness. Coming to know that Sukracharya is out of the capital, he finds that time to be propitious to visit Bali. He and his associates approach the Daitya Emperor in all humility and tell him that they have come to sue for peace and friendship with the Daityas. But the Daityas wish to make full use of this opportunity and spring to action with a view to eliminating, at one swoop, their deadliest enemy. But the magnanimous Bali intervenes and tells his followers that it is out of place for them to exhibit their prowess on any one, how ever hostile he be, when he surrenders and pleads for friendship. Indra, an adept in diplomacy, addresses Bali in words of great suavity, recalls to mind how closely akin they are to one another as children of sisters, Aditi and Diti, with a common father, Kasyapa; regrets how unfortunate misunderstandings have created a cleavage and allowed it to grow into an endemic family feud, and observes how pleasant it will be for all of them to give up hostility and live in peace and amity under Bali's leadership. He makes it a point to accost individually every important leader of the Daityas with affability to earn his goodwill. Then he moots his proposal that all of them should pool their resources and make a joint effort to churn the Ocean of Milk and obtain nectar and share it among themselves, so that all of them, Devas and Daityas alike, become immune from death and lead eternal lives. Bali's aides suspect that there is something sinister behind his palpably innocent proposal and advise their master against accepting it. But Bali sees no harm in extending his hand of friendship, as the purpose is to benefit all. He is a lover of peace and if the joint venture brings about accord between the warring families and benefits them all with deathless lives, nothing seems more welcome to his noble mind. He decides to cooperate with Indra.

(ii) The churning project :

The two sides make preparations to put their project into operation. They scoop up the Mandara Mountain and lift it from the base and bearing it on their shoulders and heads, transport it to the Ocean with steady steps. But on the way, they show signs of fatigue; some of them falter and the

mountain crashes down with a heavy thud, with the result that a large number are crushed to pulp; some escape with bruises and a few flee in fear. They rue the mishap and blame themselves for launching upon a scheme that is beyond their capacity to execute. As they howl in despair, Lord Hari takes pity on them, appears before them, banishes their fear, snatches the Mountain like a ball and placing it along His side on Garuda commands him to transport it to the Ocean beach. The Devas and Daityas alike praise the Lord for His timely intervention and help.

Then they entreat the serpent Vasuki to wind himself around the mountain and help them to rotate it, and promise him a share in the nectar. As they drop Mandara into the Ocean to do the churning, the Devas catch the hoods of Vasuki and leave the tail to the Daityas to handle. But the proud Daityas consider holding the tail as derogatory to their stature and prestige and raise a dispute; but the Devas readily concede their right and change places with them. The churning begins. A few minutes pass. The serpent raises a hue and cry, telling both sides to let go their holds. They are unable to keep the churning rod in position; and it instantly starts sinking with a loud noise. The two participating groups hang their heads in shame and grief at their incompetence. True to His promise of help, Lord Hari transforms Himself into a huge turtle, swims into the ocean's depths, gets under the base of the sinking mountain and holds it up. The Devas and Daityas find, to their joy, Mandara floating on the surface; they lift their voices in grateful acclamation of Hari for this miracle. None but Hari alone can understand His mysterious sportive pranks; He is the support of Mandara, the churning-rod; He is the sustainer of Vasuki, the binding rope helping its rotation; He appears simultaneously among the active participants in the churning process. How amazing and wonderful ! The whole scene is pervaded with a medley of various sounds — the hilarious cheers and shouts of Devas and Daityas, the harsh grating noise emerging from the friction of the mountain-base and the turtle-shell, the rough pelter of falling flakes rubbed off the skin of Vasuki, the hisses, shrieks and cries of manifold aquatic

creatures as they are thrown up from the sea, and the roar of the turbulent waters rising and falling and emitting smooth curly foam. The two parties get tired, but are too proud to admit diminution of strength and enthusiasm. At the same time, they eagerly enquire Hari for how long they are to carry on to find fulfilment of their ambition.

(iii) Emergence of Halahala :

Hari smiles in reply. They get respite but not in the way they expect. They let go their hold on the hoods and tail of Vasuki and run for their lives, for they notice a blinding flame emerging from the middle of the sea. It rises to the sky with a sudden spurt. It is accompanied with deafening thunder ! It spreads to all sides, spouting columns of thick smoke broken with intermittent flashes of spark-clusters. It blazes forth like the Fire at the time of Dissolution; jumps like a lion, leaps like a deer, soars like a bird, thus covering the entire world in its work of annihilation. It consumes whatever comes its way; it is irresistible. The Daityas and the Devas take fright and flee, recognising it to be the Poison Halahala.

Brahma and Prajapatis apprehend universal devastation and hasten to Kailasa and pray for Iswara's intervention. They extol His nature and attributes : "You are the Supreme Lord of the universe; you are its Creator, Preserver and Assimilator; you are both the Transcendental and the Immanent Spirit; all the worlds take refuge in you; and you are in all of them providing life and sustenance; you are the Self-illuminated One, without beginning, middle or end; you are the Paramatma, the Soul of all souls; Agni is your forehead; Kala is your movement; Earth is your footstool; Life is your breath; Water-source is your tongue; all quarters (*diks*) are your ears; the celestial realm is your navel; the Suns are your eyes; the sky is your head; the moon is your mind; Virtues and Righteousness are your heart; O Eternal One, it is impossible for any one to comprehend you, much less to describe you ! To One who has destroyed Death with the flash of His eye, it is no task to eliminate the Enemy of all the worlds and all living creatures. As the Devas and Daityas are engaged in churning the Ocean of Milk, Halahala has emerged and is causing great havoc to the world and no

one is able to bring it under control. You alone, and none else, can prevent harm, can liquidate the evil-doer and vouchsafe protection and restore peace. Pray, be merciful and rescue us from peril." This piteous appeal has gone home; Siva is moved. He turns to His consort and observes that it is a ruler's primary duty to save his subjects from peril and protect the worlds from devastation. Rendering good to others, even if it involves sacrifice of self, is a glorious virtue to be assiduously cultivated and steadfastly maintained and put into practice. He further declares that if Hari is pleased, all the worlds will be filled with happiness; and that he has decided to save all living creatures by devouring the frightening Halahala. Dakshayani nods assent, saying that her lord may do what he pleases. Shaken by fear the celestials may have appealed to Hara to come to their rescue. Knowing its urgency, Brahma and others may have commended acceptance of their request; considering the good of the world, Siva may have been prompted to effect the rescue. But knowing that it is her lord who is to tackle the all-destroying poison, how is it that Dakshayani, who is under no obligation, encourages Siva to take the risk and volunteers consent to his decision? It is because she is *Sarvamangala* (the universal benefactress) and it is her natural urge to wish good for all. Moreover, her firm conviction that the strength of her marital bond (*mangalasutra*) is unassailable, chases all fear about Siva's competence to meet the present challenge. Siva denounces Halahala in a thunderous voice as a universal malefactor and commands him to stop his havoc. He collects the poison as a lump in the palm of his outstretched hand, presses it hard into the size of a black-plum (*jambuphala* = *neredu*) and swallows it in a single gulp; and all this he does as though he is enjoying a sport. Strange to behold! As he drinks in the poison, the garlands of snakes adorning his chest do not shake a bit; no beads of sweat sprout on his body; his eyes do not take red tinge; the crescent on his pile of locks does not turn crimson; his lotus-face shows no trace of fading. Siva recalls to mind that his stomach is the dwelling-place of all the worlds and to obviate harm to them, he stations the fiery poison in the cavity of his throat, as if it is a condensed phial of sweet fruit-juice,

Who could have accepted with pleasure the gift of fiery poison ? Hara, and Hara alone, has that unique distinction. The imprisoned Halahala darkens his neck and shines as an ornament to his fair complexion. Do not acts of benevolence glow like jewels about the benefactors of mankind ? Brahma and Hari, Indra and Uma, raise a chorus of praise for Hara as a glorious benefactor of the universe.

It is worth considering why the churners of the Ocean approach Siva for rescue from the Poison Halahala. They have had Hari with them all along; He has helped them solve problems of transporting Mandara to Ksheera Sagara and keeping it afloat. He could have saved them from the raging fiery poison also. It would not have been a problem at all for One for whom the Serpent-Lord, Adi Sesha, provides his coils as cushioned bed and spreads his thousand hoods as sheltering canopy. Why then should they turn to Kailasa ? It is possible that they have felt embarrassed to trouble Hari, time and again, even during the initial stages of their operation. They turn to Brahma for help and he leads them to Hara. Could it be because he deemed it meet that to control a virulent agent of destruction like the Halahala, they should approach Rudra to whom belongs the portfolio of the Dissolution of the universe. Or, could it more probably be that he wished to demonstrate to them that Hara is as easily accessible and as eminently competent as Hari in solving the problems of the devotees who approach him in their misery. In fact, Hari and Hara are one; two phases of the Only One Supreme. Hara is the perfect example of *Thyagaseeli*, a willing renouncer of all pleasures and a magnanimous saviour of all living creatures from peril. He is in command of all resources of affluence but he willingly embraces a rigorous abstemious life; abandons imposing palaces and makes the cremation-ground his place of residence; rejects soft silk apparel and prefers to wear an elephant-skin; renounces myrrh, musk and frankincense and smears himself with ashes, gives up ornaments of gold, gems, pearls and other precious metals and floral garlands and revels in adorning himself with serpents. He is invincible; none can resist his might when roused to exterminate wicked tormentors. Does not his trident liquidate the Tripurasuras in a trice and thus secure redemption for the

world? His magnanimity, his high-minded generosity, his readiness to undergo any hardship for the good of the world make him unique. No wonder that the churners of the Sea repair to him for protection; for he is easily accessible, graciously generous and highly competent.

(iv) The Sea throws up its treasures :

The Devas and Daityas now revert to their undertaking and begin afresh the churning of the Ocean of Milk. A beautiful cow with spotless white skin, short horns, and attractive udder and luscious teats yielding nectarine milk comes out. The sages, who are usually engaged in the performance of sacrificial rites, become successful in their claim for this *Kamadhenu*; for, they need the favours she can bestow on them in the proper discharge of their duties. Next emerges a handsome white stallion of noble breed, *Uchchaisrava*; Bali appropriates him as a precious acquisition. A few moments later, further churning throws up *Airavata*, a mighty white tusker with a prominent hump and lusty proboscis and majestic gait; Indra lays claim to him. Then arises out of the ocean the magnificent *Kalpa vriksha*, capable of satisfying the desires of aspirants and finds an honoured place in Indra's grove, Nandanavana. A bevy of blooming damsels with beaming faces and charming looks, slender waists and prominent bosoms, arise from the sea. Indra admires their eternal youth and welcomes the *apsaras* to adorn his court and provide entertainment with their talents of music and dance. Soon after, the Milk Sea throws up Chandra, the Moon, who radiates mellow beams of soothing, refreshing light; and Brahma assigns him a place in the starry firmament.

(v) The fascinating Lakshmi :

All eyes are rivetted upon the fascinating figure that now emerges from the ocean like a flash of lightning. Brahma seems to have put all his creative talents to exercise in rearing this unique beauty : all the cream of the Milk Ocean has gone into the constitution of her smooth body; the flashing sparks of the monsoon lightnings are pooled together to provide shine to her features; the *delicateness* of the tender creepers and tendrils winding about their props and the *deliciousness* of the fragrant

lotus- blooms smiling at dawn, form the ingredients of her enchanting personality. A radiant face, wide eyes, mellow looks, crimson lips, frail waist, protruding bosom, prominent hips, slender limbs and delicate legs, luxuriant raven locks, lend an irresistible attraction to this matchless beauty. The admiration of the onlookers climaxes into adoration of her divinity. Arrangements are under way for her auspicious bath. Indra places a grand gem-studded seat for the graceful lady. The celestial damsels fetch gold vessels filled with scented waters; Bhudevi brings aromatic saplings; Kamadhenu provides milk and purificatory ingredients; and Vasanta presents a cup filled to the brim with sweet honey collected from fresh blossoms. Rishis recite benedictory Vedic hymns; Megha's choir play their instruments and drums; the conch booms; the flute wafts its melodies; and the mighty elephants guarding the eight quarters (*diks*) stretch their trunks, collect the sacred waters from places known for their sanctity and drench the lady with them. On the completion of this refreshing bath, Samudra arrives and presents his daughter with a pair of bright yellow silk garments; Varuna hastens to deck her with Vaijayantimala, a garland of fragrant flowers with their cups overflowing with honey. Viswakarma does not lag behind; he is ready with his bunch of sparkling gold ornaments, armlets and bracelets, waistbands and anklets. Bharati adorns her with a pearl necklace, while Brahma fills her palms with a pair of never-fading lotus-blossoms. Vedas pronounce benediction on Lakshmi while Akasa proclaims that she will reign supreme over all the worlds. Her bewitching beauty astounds all those present : the rishis get perplexed; the celestials, yogis and saints are thrown into confusion; the Daityas are stunned into silence.

And Lakshmi surveys the scene before her; she shows an acute power of perception in assessing the relative worth of the dignitaries gathered there. Durvasa is an outstanding *tapasvi* but lapses into fits of uncontrollable anger; Brihaspati and Sukra are profound *jnanis* but have failed to relinquish attachment to the pleasures of court-life; Yama is *dharma* personified but he lacks compassion; Bali is an incomparable donor (*daata*) but he has fallen while fulfilling his commitment to Vamana; Surya, Chandra and Vayu impress by their power, radiance and speed,

but they are constantly on the move and are wanting in steadiness; Seshu enjoys life eternal (*chiranjeevi*) but he is subject to occasional outbursts of cruel ferocity; Kings like Raivata and Muchikunda are renowned for their excellent virtues and amiable behaviour, but they cannot escape mortality; Markandeya is immortal, no doubt, but he presents, with his ugly matted locks, a forbidding appearance. Indra has a charming personality; true, but with his roving, deceitful escapades (as with Ahalya) he becomes totally unreliable. The magnificent Brahma too is there, the great creator and the exponent of the Vedas; but, unfortunately, he has not overcome passion (*kaama*) as witnessed in his eager longing for Saraswati (his own creation) for his spouse. Then could Iswara be flawless? With all his fascinating qualities of easy accessibility, noble magnanimity and liberal munificence, he is unable to protect himself; he seeks refuge in Vishnu, when the evil-minded Bhasmasura tries to test the efficacy of Siva's boon on the donor himself. And now, Lakshmi sets her eyes on Vishnu.

In all this confusion; Hari *alone* remains calm; equanimity does not desert him. Lakshmi holds a garland of lotus-flowers in her hand; cogitates over the relative suitability of the worthies before her; and finally chooses Hari as her incomparable Spouse. Hari's mansion smiles with inexhaustible affluence; He is the repository of all virtues; He is the personification of truth, goodness and beauty: He has overcome the six inner enemies of Desire, Anger, Greed, Delusion, Arrogance and Jealousy. Steadiness, alertness, efficiency, strength, power, vitality and all auspicious qualities ever attend on Him; above all, He is flawless, perfect, immaculate; none can equal Him, much less excel Him as a fascinating Lover; He radiates light and cheer all around. Lakshmi adorns Hari with the garland in her hand and entreats His consent; and with shy glances playing on His chest, she indicates her craving for a place thereon for permanent stay. Hari, who is not less eager to welcome her as His Consort, seats her on His chest, which is already made effulgent with the precious gem Kaustubha, and with gold and pearl chains and numerous garlands of fragrant flowers. Brahma, Rudra, Indra and other celestials,

sages and saints rejoice; and rain flowers and shower praises on the Divine Spouses.

(vi) The Vessel of Nectar :

The Daityas alone, as a race, look askance at this auspicious consummation and feel annoyed and disappointed. But they mind not, as their main purpose in joining the Devas in the churning project is to acquire the pot of nectar. So they continue to participate in the joint venture. From the Sea emerges, Varuni, a voluptuous beauty with alluring looks; the Daityas grab her with Hari's consent. The parties carry on churning with all vigour; they have long been at it; they eagerly look forward to the emergence of the Vessel of Nectar. The time is ripe to reward their labours and to fulfil their ambition. There appears before them a radiant youth, with the features associated with Hari, long sturdy arms, lotus-eyes with red smear at the edges, a prominent chest, flowing locks of shining smooth hair, beautiful neck shaped like a conch. He is draped in yellow silk and adorned with jewels of gold, pearls and precious stones. He is the reputed physician of the celestials, Dhanvantri, an adept in Ayurveda; and he holds the coveted Pot of Nectar in his hand. The Daityas immediately fling themselves into action and, brushing aside the Devas by sheer superiority in might and power, snatch the Nectar from Dhanvantri. They have appropriated the Nectar, the elixir they are looking for and longing to have; they have kept the Devas at bay. The celestials feel unequal to meet the challenge. They turn to Hari wailing over the loss and seeking His intervention. Hari responds to their prayer and assures them that He will safeguard their interest by exercising His mysterious power of spreading a veil of illusion over the Daityas.

(vii) Jaganmohini :

There is a commotion among the various clans of asuras, daityas, danavas and rakshasas, the most powerful among them trying to grab the pot of nectar, thus starting an interne-cine struggle for clannish interests or even for individual benefit. It is strange that a few among them suggest that it is unjust not to allow the suras, participants in the exploit, a share in

the fruit thereof. This voice of sanity is drowned in the din of prevailing excitement. The pot changes hands so frequently from the less powerful to the more powerful among them; and the number of contestants mounts higher and higher so quickly that there is the danger of the pot itself breaking in the grabbing process. To arrest such a catastrophe, Vishnu transforms Himself into a *Jaganmohini*, a woman of bewitching beauty and seductive charm. Every feature of her form, every movement of her limbs, every gesture in her demeanour, every posture she strikes, is calculated to attract attention and keep the asuras under spell. The Devas are in sore trouble; being of *sattavic* disposition, their minds naturally turn to God invoking His help. But the *asuras* in whom *rajasic* and *tamasic* elements play a dominant role are conscious of their might; they are sure that they can flout their natural enemy. Thought of God does not cross their minds. Their belief in their own supremacy makes them proud, arrogant. They fall into the snare spread before them by this fascinating lady. They accost her with due courtesy, praise her charms, enquire after her name and place and her wish in visiting them. But without waiting for her answer, they explain their problem and entreat her to distribute the nectar among themselves and their brothers, the suras, without fear or favour, with perfect impartiality. Jaganmohini sees how her charm has overpowered them. Yet, she expresses her wonder how they have come to put trust in volatile woman who is believed to be prone to enjoy the company of handsome men without scruple. She reminds them how elders caution people against confiding in women whose concealed thoughts, which rage as wild fire, are camouflaged with words of nectarine sweetness, and thus lead to a companionship which spells utter disaster. But since they are pleased with her, she says that she is prepared to undertake the responsibility and distribute the nectar as she deems just and proper. The sweet looks, the fond glances, the pleasing words, the lascivious gestures, and other myriad allurements which have accompanied her assurance, turn into soft silken bands and gag them into inane silence. The lady takes the pot of nectar, cajoles all of them into

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accepting her discretion in the distribution of nectar as indisputable. The Celestials and the Daityas observe fast, purify themselves with a bath, perform the ritual of oblations to Agni, honour Vedic scholars with gifts, put on spotless attire and assemble in a hall and sit in rows on mats of *kusa* grass to receive their share of nectar. The Lady arrives holding the pot in her delicate palm; she seems to have felt tired under the weight of her heavy posteriors, protruding breasts and mountainous pile of luxuriant locks of hair; yet, she manages to move with grace, her bright ornaments hightening her beautiful features. She makes the Devas and Daityas to form separate rows as she inwardly feels that giving nectar to Daityas is like feeding poisonous serpents with milk; and that such unwisdom ensues in universal disaster. She addresses the Daityas with sweet words, cracks jokes with them in a jubilant mood, strikes graceful poses to feed their appetites, delights them with an array of honeyed smiles interspersed with magnetic side-glances; and the Daityas forget themselves, caught in the intricate web of mysterious illusion. Meanwhile, the Lady distributes the nectar among the celestials to their great joy. The Daityas are held back by their fear that the Lady might take offence if they appear to distrust her and press their claim for nectar. They remain tongue-tied as they are wholly absorbed in drinking in the nectarine beauty of the ravishing vision before them. One of the Daityas, Rahu, sneaks into the celestial row; but, on a signal from Surya and Chandra, Vishnu cuts off Rahu's head with his disc before the nectar can go beneath his throat, and accords a place to it among the planets. Vishnu thus helps His devotees and denies Daityas even a drop of nectar.

Lord Hari is accused of committing an inexcusable fraud on the Daityas and exhibiting an unjustifiable nepotism toward the Devas in this episode of *Ksheerasagara Mathana*. But how far is this verdict fair? The Devas have, at the very outset, approached Hari for help to rehabilitate themselves after the utter rout at Bali's hands. Their attitude and conduct have always been governed by *sattvaguna*, by their orientation towards the Supreme Being and humble surrender to Him. They deem themselves as belonging to Him and therefore are oblige

to carry out His commands and render all services in a spirit of humility. There are occasions when they deviate, under the impulsions of *rajas* and *tamas*, from the path of duty. But they soon repent for their follies and crave His pardon. Thus whatever they think or say or do is in accord with the Divine Will or Ordination. There is thus ample justification for Hari to promote the interests of His devotees. It is Hari who suggests the project of churning of the Ocean of Milk to obtain Nectar, the divine elixir, to make them impervious to death; it is He who suggests involvement of asuras in the exploit; it is He who transports Mandara to the Sea, when the combined hordes fall under its weight; it is He who transforms Himself into a huge Turtle and prevents the mountain from sinking and keeps it afloat; it is with His indirect connivance that the two parties approach Siva with Brahma at their head, and obtain rescue from the raging all-destroying poison, *Halahala*. His gracious help at every stage has come in response to the prayers of *suras*. Though the *asuras* have experienced reverses and shared the benefits of Hari's favours along with the *devas*, their obtuse minds refuse, all along, to recognise that there is a Supreme Power to whom they should submit. Such humility is foreign to a race in which *rajasic* and *tamasic* tendencies flourish and find eloquent expression in acts of arrogance and stubbornness, wantonness and wickedness. To make nectar available to them is to strengthen the forces of evil and work towards the ruin of the world. Jaganmohini has *nowhere promised* that she will distribute nectar with an even hand among all the participants, although the *Daityas* have expected it of her. She has made a commitment in a skilful way keeping all options to herself, leaving none to others : She has said that she would distribute the nectar according to the best of her understanding and that they should accept her decision without disputing its merits or demerits. If the *Daityas* have failed to get the fruits of their labour, they have themselves to blame. It is true that their contribution to the success of the project is considerable; but it is not given to *all* to gain their ends in any undertaking, particularly to those who are out of favour with Providence. Moreover, at the time of distribution of nectar, the *Daityas* seem to have lost themselves in excitement and enjoyment,

drinking a different elixir, the nectar of Jaganmohini's beauty and charm. Why then complain that they are deceived? They have deceived themselves. How can those who, in the arrogance of might and power, fail to recognise, and surrender to, the Supreme Being, expect to realise fulfilment of their ambitions? There is no point in charging the Lord with nepotism. Each one gets what is due to him, what he deserves to have; that seems to be the law of Providence.

The churning of the Ocean of Milk suggests a process of discipline to spiritual aspirants. Milk represents God's nature, form and attributes in all their expansive splendour. With our intellects (which have acquired knowledge of God) as the stirring instruments, and with our hearts (which have cultivated love of God) as the binding cords, and with the divine and demoniac qualities (which constitute our nature) handling the two ends of the cords, we engage ourselves in this spiritual churning exercise. Unmindful alike of the pleasant and painful experiences during the process, we have to pursue tenaciously our arduous task till we attain the end-product, the *parama purushartha*, the amrita, the divine elixir, of ineffable bliss. Be it noted that this bliss is reserved only for those whose minds keep away from immersion in sense-pleasures, whose hearts are riveted to a steady contemplation of His affluence and splendour, whose souls are absorbed in complete self-dedication to Him and surrender at His gracious footstool. This blessing of immortality is denied to those on whom this discipline has no effect, on those who continue under the dominance of their demoniac tendencies and perverse hostility to every thing divine.



II - 10. ISWARA AND JAGANMOHINI

Hara comes to know from the celestials how Hari has thrown a veil of delusion on *asuras* by assuming the form of Jaganmohini, a woman of unrivalled beauty and charm, and has managed to distribute all the nectar among the *devas* exclusively. He is eager to see that fascinating female form of Vishnu; and so he goes to Vaikuntha with his beloved Consort to entreat Him to bless him with that vision. To Vishnu, who is the Supreme Lord, the All-in-all, Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of worlds, the Transcendental and Immanent Power, nothing is out of reach, everything is possible—even the assumption of an enchanting female form. Vishnu beams a smile at Iswara, assures him that He will give him the joy he has asked for, but cautions him not to be inalert, not to forget himself even for a moment. So saying, Vishnu disappears from sight.

To tempt the *Daityas* (in whom *rajasic* and *tamasic* propensities predominate and carnal and sensual appetites set the tone and tenor of their lives) with His lovely female form and fling them into confounding illusion is a mere child's play for Vishnu. But to exercise a similar spell on Siva (who, being a compound of the essence of *sattvaguna*, commands unruffled equanimity) demands a much greater manifestation of charming features and alluring manoeuvres. And Vishnu's manipulatory tactics defy challenge and display their invincible power in subjugating Siva and making him a slave of all-consuming, raging passion.

It does not take long before a Lady of comely face, lovely eyes, charming features, appears before Siva playing with a ball in a garden. Her sleeky curls of hair playing on her forehead, her alabaster cheeks radiant with the wavy reflection of the diamond ear-studs, her prominent breasts peeping through the thin, silky veil, her frail waist shaking under her sprightly movements, her gold necklaces and chains, her armlets, bracelets and anklets brightening her slender limbs, her garlands of sweet, aromatic leaves and fragrant flowers wafting intoxicating sensations -- it is a vision never before

witnessed by Hara. It is strange that Hara—who has reduced to ashes Manmatha (*Cupid*) when he has tried to provoke him into love, who has overthrown Yama (*Death*) when he has stridently attempted to carry off his devotee, who has annihilated the universal menace, the Tripurasuras with his flaming Trisula—loses command over his mind and succumbs to the allurements of the Lady before him -- and that too, in the presence of his beloved Consort, whom he has honoured as his 'better half' in appreciation of her beauty, love and devotion. Such is the mysterious power of the veil of illusion spread by Hari as Jaganmohini that even Siva throws all caution, restraint and decency to winds and pursues the Lady with unconcealed passion, craving for her companionship. Seeing that her magic has begun to work, the Lady employs wily tricks of seduction in quick succession, flings arrows of side-glances at him; tempts him with genial smiles; confuses him with receding steps; attracts him with striking postures, exposing her alluring anatomy; confounds him by concealing herself behind flowery shrubs and yet takes care to announce her presence through the tingling of bells of some of her ornaments; reappears at a distance; handles the ball with deftness to disclose the delicacy of her fingers; throws it up and observes it with uplifted face to reveal the splendour of her conch like neck; drops it down and bends her looks to the earth so as to expose to view the beauty of her posteriors, legs and feet; repeats this sport with the ball till beads of sweat spread over her face like pearls and provide relief to her coral lips. Noticing that Hara is thrown off his guard and is in hot chase of her, the Lady speeds up, fondles deer and peacocks on the way, enjoys swings in creeper Cradles, mounts hillocks, jumps into cool bowers, exchanges greetings with birds and thus enjoys an exciting sport -- all this pastime is intended to captivate Hara and drag him closer into the net of illusion.

True, Hara has overcome Cupid and triumphed over Kala and subjugated Yama and destroyed the Tripurasuras. Even such as he, is absolutely helpless and is unable to withstand the sharp arrows of this charming maiden's looks.

Hara is now clean bowled. He has lost the power to think. He has become oblivious of his great virtues. He is not conscious of the presence of his wife and retinue. Heady passion drives him headlong the moment he notices the Lady hastening to cover, when a squall of wind denudes her of her upper garment. When passion gets overcharged, modesty and decency become the foremost casualties. Hara runs after her; it looks as though Cupid, whom he has formerly eliminated in his rage, has come back to life to wreak vengeance on him. Hara comes close and extends his hand to clasp the hem of her flying garment; the excitement reaches its pitch and results in ejaculation. It is only then that he comes to his senses and realises how woefully mistaken he is in pursuing an illusory vision as a reality.

The Lady transforms herself into Vishnu and smiles. Hara stands before the Supreme Lord, embarrassed and crest-fallen. But Hari compliments Siva, for it is given to him alone, and to none else, to perceive, and know through experience, the efficacy and supremacy of the mysterious power (*Maaya*) that He controls and wields for the good of the Universe. Hara and Parvati praise the gracious Lord for His magnificent qualities and take leave of Him with hearts full of joy and gratitude.

This Episode shows how it is not possible even for Siva to understand, much less pierce through, the mysterious power of the Supreme Lord in creating the Universe, in preserving it and resuming it into Himself and in the multifarious sports He indulges in for His own joy and for the good of the Universe. The Rishis of old have, by their power of introspection, delved deep into the evolution of the Universe and, by God's grace and sheer intuition, visioned the entire process and recorded their observations. Metaphysical exposition of the Universe could go no further — And they have come to the inevitable conclusion that the designs and workings of Providence remain inscrutable; that they are beyond the reach of intellect and imagination. Modern science makes investigations to find a rational explanation of the process and succeeds to a certain extent; but it looks aghast when its conclusions prove wrong; it has to express wonder at the inscrutable power of a Supreme

Intelligence governing the entire Universe. The thesis the universe is formed by a fortuitous coalescence of certain elements and that it disintegrates when they fall apart in an equally casual manner has been advanced and rebutted in the immemorial past. The truth is that the most illumined sages and celestial lords have failed to understand, much less unravel, this mystery of God's plan and its workings.



II - II. EMPEROR BALI AND VAMANA

Emperor Bali is a magnificent personality; he holds a pre-eminent place among the rulers of the Danava race. He has imbibed from his grandfather, Prahlada, a fervent faith in the existence of a Supreme Power, a strict abidance in duty and a meek surrender to His all-governing will. He has emulated from the glorious example of his father, Virochana, the value of liberal philanthropy and the pleasure it brings when extended to the point of extreme self-abnegation exercised without any expectation of reward. A rare assemblage of these virtues in a proper measure in Bali's constitution makes him an admirable ruler and an attractive gentleman.

I. Bali's supremacy :

Adityas (*suras*) and Daityas (*asuras*) are the children of Kasyapa; the former are the offspring of Aditi and the latter of Diti. Though they have a common father and their mothers two sisters, they have developed mutual enmity from the very outset, possibly because of different constitutional tendencies which are hard to reconcile. Internecine family feuds recur intermittently with varying fortunes, with Adityas scoring victories some times and Daityas at other times. When Bali becomes the ruler of the Daityas,

he proves to be mightier by far than Indra and the celestial lords and consequently holds sway over all the worlds. Reeling under the asura onslaught, the devas approach Brahma and Siva for protection and advice. In their turn, they lead them to the Supreme Hari to implore His mercy. The Lord counsels patience, for the time is not propitious to gain ascendancy over the Daityas. He suggests to them a strategy, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, and advises them to seek the participation of Daityas in this stupendous task of obtaining nectar, the divine elixir, which would make them invulnerable to death. He promises to be with them and help them realise their ambition and see that the Daityas are denied the reward of their toil.

2. Indra's strategy :

In working out this strategy, Indra shows remarkable skill; approaches Bali, laments the unfortunate hostility that has sprung up among children of sisters with a common father; invites him to join in this venture of obtaining nectar from the Ocean of Milk and share the benefit of securing deathless, eternal life. The Daityas wish to avail themselves of this opportunity and do away with Indra and his companions. The noble-minded Bali intervenes and restrains his followers from causing offence or danger to Indra who has come to seek his friendship. Even a sworn enemy is to be treated with courtesy and kindness when he seeks reconciliation. Bali is a lover of peace; he does not take recourse to war, unless circumstances compel him to that end. He sees no harm in extending his hand of friendship as the purpose is to benefit all-devas and daityas alike. But Bali's aides have their reservations; they suspect that something heinous is hidden behind the apparently transparent proposal. But Bali is too magnanimous to yield to such suspicions and sets aside their advice. The absence of Sukracharya from Bali's court at that time makes Indra's task easier; and the Daitya Emperor is caught in the web of Indra's machinations.

Daityas render willing and hearty cooperation to the celestials during the churning-operations and share the tasks

and the troubles. True to His assurance, Hari responds to Indra whenever he is in trouble and prays for help. He transports Mandara to the Ocean on His mount Garuda, when the combined forces get crushed under it; He assumes the form of a huge Turtle to keep the Mountain on His shell; He accompanies Brahma when the latter seeks Siva's intervention to save the worlds from the blazing poison, Halahala; He indirectly helps the celestials when they appropriate to themselves the various beneficent creatures emerging from the Ocean during churning: Kamadhenu, Kalpavriksha, Iravata, damsels of eternal youth and charm, Chandra.....etc. He accepts Koustubha and Vijayantimala and finds a niche for the charming and affluent Lakshmi; on His own bosom. Finally, He becomes Jaganmohini; and the Lady throws all under the spell of her charms, and distributes the divine elixir among the celestial hordes and denies Daityas any share in it, not even a particle of it. Through all this churning operation, Bali plays no particular role beyond extending to the celestials the cooperation he has promised to give. It is only at the end that Bali sees how Indra has played a mean trick on him and how his armies are cheated of their due, for all their contribution to the success of the exploit.

3. Bali's defiance and discomfiture :

The Asuras are deprived of their share of nectar by Jaganmohini under whose spell they remain till the nectar is exhausted. By the time they realise how they are deceived, it becomes too late to repair the damage. Disappointment makes them furious and Bali marshals his forces for combat with Indra. The Suras under Indra fall into battle array, their spirits enlivened with the draught of nectar. A severe battle ensues, the stalwarts on either side cheering their hordes to give a good account of themselves. They are well-matched: Indra challenges Bali; Guha opposes Taraka; Varuna faces Huti; Yama confronts Kalanabha; Viswakarma engages Maya; Surya opposes the sons of Bali; Soma defies Rahu; Aswins set themselves against Vishaparva; Agni flares up against Puloma;

Maruths rage against Nivata Kavachasand thus every hero chooses his opponent for a display of martial prowess and skill in the wielding of weapons. Pitched battles take place among the various battalions and the din of mutual challenges and clashes of weapons rises high. The entire battle field is strewn with the dead and the wounded; blood flows freely in streams; corpses of horses and elephants and broken chariots add to the ghastliness of the scene. Indra appears invincible; all the weapons employed by Bali fail before his opponent's superior arms. Driven to the extreme, Bali disappears from the scene, takes recourse to unfair methods, conceals himself behind a veil of darkness and hurls stones and meteors and creates by magic wild animals and poisonous reptiles, to do havoc among the enemy ranks. The Suras now find themselves in a miserable plight and set up a howl of despair and agony and pray for Hari's intercession and protection. Moved by pity for His devotees, Hari arrives on His mount in all His splendour, dressed in purple silk, adorned with all his ornaments and equipped with His divine weapons. Hari's advent chases the illusory vision spread by Bali; the Suras rise reinvigorated and renew the fight. The mere thought of the Lord and mention of His name produce an immediate effect on the devotee and save him from the danger that confronts him. Kalanemi aims his spear at Garuda; Hari intercepts it and employs it to kill the Danava. Mali and Sumali and Malyavanta mount a joint attack on Garuda; Hari hurls his disc and chops off their heads. Indra and other celestial lords, inspired by the presence and blessings of Hari carry on a furious fight. Bali and his armies put up a counter-attack but without success. Indra draws his potent Vajrayudha and challenges Bali to defend himself. He blames him for employing unfair methods which expose him to the ridicule and condemnation of all noble warriors. Bali makes a dignified reply; "The victor of yesterday may suffer defeat today; none can determine the result of battle with any certainty. Success and defeat, affluence and indigence, are like earthen-lamps swayed in the breeze, like the phases of the moon waxing and waning. It is therefore foolish to feel proud, anticipating sure victory". Indra's confidence is based

on the support Vishnu has given to him and the celestials a little while ago. Bali is thrown off his chariot when Indra's well-aimed spear strikes him. Noticing his friend's fall, Jambha challenges Indra; he strikes Iravata, which reels under the blow. As Indra hastens to mount his chariot, the Daitya pierces the charioteer, Matali, with his lance. Indra becomes furious and strikes off the enemy's head with his flaming sword, Vajrayudha. Coming to know of Jambha's death, his brothers Bala, Paka and Namucha, crowd round Indra and make him the target of a joint attack. They spread devastation all around; they wound the charioteer; they annoy Indra with a consistent barrage of shafts. The celestials raise a cry of panic. But Indra breaks through the cage of arrows and shines like the sun emerging from clouds. Wielding the sword with great vigour he makes his passage through the enemy hordes, felling their leaders on the right and left. As the asuras fall back, unable to resist Indra's onslaught, Namuchi checks him hurling his mighty spear at him. Indra breaks it and aims his Vajrayudha at his throat. Strange to see that his mighty weapon, which has always succeeded in its mission (in wrecking the wings of mountains, in liquidating Vritrasura and in blasting multitudes of opposing enemies) now fails unaccountably; Namuchi remains unscathed and the perplexed Indra stares at vacancy. A mysterious voice from the sky proclaims that the asura enjoys invulnerability from any weapon which is entirely dry or wholly wet and counsels Indra to choose a weapon that suits the purpose. Thus advised, the celestial lord loses no time and presses into service an arrow made of foam (*phenamu*); and lo and behold! the head of Namuchi rolls to the ground. The celestial lords flourish in every part of the battle field and rout the armies of the enemy. Indra has scored a glorious victory; the enemies flee helter-skelter; Gandharvas hail the victory with song and celestial damsels with dance; sages shower their blessings while Yakshas and Siddhas rain flowers on Indra and the other chiefs. Narada arrives at the bidding of Brahma, compliments the victors, advises them to cease hostilities as most of their enemies are dead or wounded. The jubilant *suras* wend their way to Amaravati. The survivors among the asuras gather

round their King and escort him to a place of retreat. Meanwhile, their preceptor, Sukracharya, arrives and learns of the sad happenings. He revives the dead asura heroes and hosts by employing *Mritasanjeevani vidya*, a potent special incantation of which he is the sole master. Bali shows a remarkable equanimity of mind even in this humiliating plight of utter defeat; because he knows that life is full of vicissitudes and one has to take them in one's stride.

4. Bali's rise to power :

Bali's has, under Sukra's blessings and guidance, reestablished his power and ascendancy. He performs a great sacrificial rite known as *Viswajidyaga*, following his preceptor's instructions, to the very letter. Pleased with his offerings and oblations, the Sacrificial Fire presents him with a bright gold chariot, steeds of noble breed and great mettle, a lofty mast with the flag-design of a roaring lion, a resplendent bow, an impregnable armour and a pair of quivers filled with fiery shafts. Prahlada, his grandfather well-known for purity and piety, bestows on him a garland of ever-fresh and never-fading lotus-blossoms. Sukracharya blesses him with a superb gift of a conch, excelling the moon in whiteness and mellow light. Bali distributes his wealth and possessions among the deserving Brahmins on a magnificent scale and earns their goodwill; he humbles himself before the elders and obtains their blessings; he offers worship to the great Deities with all reverence and secures their gracious favours. Bali once again rises in stature and strength; he summons his generals and armies, pools his resources; and sets out on an expedition against Indra. Hurt pride provokes him; vengeful retaliation for earlier defeat urges him on. He must prove his supremacy over the celestials. Then only can he have peace and joy.

Bali lays siege to Amaravati. His armies dispose themselves at crucial points. They blow their conchs and horns and trumpets; they beat their war-drums; their enthusiasm and excitement in hurling challenges at their opponents makes the resulting din so frightening that the ladies collapse and the stalwarts lose heart. Indra himself feels nervous to face Bali.

who blazes like *Pralayagni*, the Fire of Dissolution. He wonders how his enemy, who has lately suffered utter rout at his hands, now appears before him with such dazzling effulgence and irresistible prowess. He knows not what rigorous penance has endowed him with that magnificent courage and self-assurance. Indra seeks the advice of the learned preceptor. Brihaspati tells him that Bali owes his present stature and might to the blessings of sages and that, barring Hara and Hari, none can withstand his onslaught, and that prudence dictates that the celestials should avoid confrontation and bide their time elsewhere in disguise. Following his counsel that discretion is the better part of valour, the celestial lords and their followers desert the capital and sneak away to their places of hiding. Bali marches in triumph without having to meet any confrontation; ascends the throne and establishes his jurisdiction over the three worlds. He performs a hundred horse-sacrifices under Bhrigu's tutelage. Under Bali's benignant reign, the entire universe enjoys perfect order and peace; the seasons fail not to bestow their plenty on the people; poverty is unknown and misery finds no quarter; people are not lacking in affluence. There is no discontent: there is no discord. No breach is allowed in daily worship or in the observance of ceremonial functions; temple funds suffer no diversion in their use. Bali has proved himself to be a real Raja, as he has won the hearts of his subjects by his fairness and considerateness, by his justice tempered with mercy. But the celestials are grovelling in misery, as they have to shift for themselves in hiding, for fear of reprisal from Bali; and this fact is a blot on Bali's escutcheon. For, his hostility to the celestials rankles in his mind and prevents him from proclaiming general amnesty, or quarantine of safety for them.

5. Aditi's vrata :

Aditi, wife of Kasyapa and mother of the *suras*, undergoes a hell of misery for the plight of her sons who have fled in panic to places of safety among rocks and woods. Kasyapa, as is his wont, spends hours and days at a stretch in contemplation; and visits his wife Aditi during the breaks in his yogic exer-

cises. During the current visit, he finds her in utter desolation and grief; he shows his concern for her, comforts her with soothing words. He enquires whether there is any lapse in the observance of routine obligations - in offering worship to Lord Vishnu, in honouring sages and saints, in extending hospitality to visitors and guests etc. Aditi explains the reason for her sadness. The Daityas in the flush of accentuated strength fling kindness to winds and threaten destruction of her offspring and Diti, unmindful of a sister's obligation, remains a passive spectator; and as a consequence, Indra and the other celestial lords have to flee for their lives; and Bali occupies Amaravati and holds unassailable sway over all the worlds. He monopolises all the offerings made in sacrifices and does not yield even a morsel to Indra. There is no knowing of the whereabouts of Sachi and Jayanta and other beloved members of the family. Aditi entreats Kasyapa to find a way to ending the sorrows of the celestials. Kasyapa is a great seer, indeed, he is Pasyaka; he knows that all these happenings are the workings of an inscrutable Providence; and that all living beings are enveloped by the illusion spread by Vishnu. He suggests that Aditi may strive to please the Supreme Lord by performing a rite known as *Payobhakshana*, whereby He will fulfil all her wishes and bring about the needed amelioration to the *Suras*. Aditi punctiliously carries out her husband's instructions in performing the *vrata* in the first fortnight of Phalguna month with her mind concentrated on the Lord. Pleased with her devotion, the unseen Supreme discloses Himself to her in His genial human form, dressed in purple silk and carrying disc, mace, conch and lotus in his four arms. Aditi is delighted; she lauds His features and His attributes, showers praises on Him, presents a heart-rending account of her sorrows and craves for the amelioration of her forlorn children. Her piteous appeal strikes home; the gracious Lord declares His wish to be born a son of Kasyapa and Aditi with purpose to retrieve the lost fortunes of the celestials. Use of force is of no avail to dislodge the *Asuras* from their exalted positions. A different strategy is to be adopted by which Bali can be deprived of his sovereignty. Vishnu advises Aditi to keep her mind steadily on Him and pay her attentions to Kasyapa and that He will manage the rest. His word is law

unto Aditi. In course of time, she pleases her husband in a sport of dalliance. She conceives; and as weeks and months pass, she shows the signs of pregnancy in a more and more pronounced manner but with an unusual, mysterious glow, even because the child who is growing in her womb is the Supreme One who holds the entire universe within Himself and who is a stranger to birth, growth and death. As the time for delivery approaches, Brahma arrives and addresses his panegyric to the child-to-be : "O Lord, Thou art the Primal Cause; Thou art the Supreme without beginning, middle or end; to release, sustain and resume all living creatures and inorganic substances is Thy sport; it is Thy gracious Considerateness (*Vatsalya*) for Thy devotees that impels Thee to undergo, for their sake, any strain, any humiliation, without demur, nay, with instant pleasure. How magnanimous of Thee to have chosen to take birth of Aditi to rescue her children from their disgraceful plight of prolonged obscurity and neglect and restore them to their former affluence and glory." Mind fails to conceive, intellect is at a loss to understand, heart falters to feel, imagination shudders to scale, the mystery of this Supreme Phenomenon : The Birthless One takes birth, the Formless One assumes form, the Nameless One acquires a name, the Changeless One suffers vicissitudes, the Passive Witness turns into an active participant, the Impartial Judge becomes a partisan advocate, the magnificent Enchanter transforms Himself into an insignificant dwarf, the munificent Benefactor degrades Himself into a despicable mendicant - all this humiliation He undergoes for the establishment of truth and righteousness, vindication of virtue, and promotion of good and, as a corollary, elimination of the obstacle of evil. *Samsreyan bhavati Jaayamaanaah !*

6. Hari's Incarnation as Vamana :

On the twelfth day of the first fortnight of the month Sravana, a little after noon, Hari manifests Himself as a human being with sapphire glow and with all the insignia associated with Him - with four hands equipped with mace, disc, conch and lotus, with purple silk for dress, with a bright red mole and flower garlands and the resplendent Lakshmi and the gem Kaushtubha and other gold ornaments adorning the chest, and with

ear-studs, armlets, bracelets, waist-bands and anklets lending a radiant glow to features. The Celestial Orders (Yakshas, Vidyadhara, Siddhas and Charanas, Gandharvas, Kinneras, Kimpurushas) rejoice, sing and dance, shower flowers and praises; Rishis, sages and saints with Kasyapa at their head pronounce benediction. Then Hari withdraws His magnificent divine form, and transforms Himself into a short-statured boy of a few summers – an age which is considered suitable for the investiture of the sacred thread and for initiation into the spiritual lore. Aditi's joy knows no bounds; she hugs him close to her bosom, fondles his face, kisses his cheeks. Is he not her beloved darling? Kasyapa and the other sages see that all the usual traditional religious rites are gone through. The investiture of the sacred thread is an essential and significant rite: Aditi gives him the loin-cloth (*Kaupeenam*) to put on; Kasyapa adorns his waist with a band made of sacred fibres (*Mounji*), Brihaspati invests him with the sacred thread (*Yagnyopaveetham*), Bhudevi presents him with deer-skin (*Krishnaginam*), Soma equips him with the staff (*Dandam*), the deity presiding over outer-space provides him with the umbrella (*Chāthram*), Brahma supplies him with water-jug (*Kamandalam*); Saraswati bestows on him the rosary of beads (*Japamala*); Savita initiates him into the *gayatri* incantation; and the Saptarshis present him with blades of sacred Kusa grass (*Kusas*); Kubera gifts the begging bowl (*Bhiksha Paatra*) and Bhavani fills the bowl with the first morsel of food. The little Brahmachari recites Vedic hymns and offers oblations to the Fire at the altar.

7. Vamana sets out on his mission :

Vamana is now ready to start on his mission. On enquiry, he learns, from Brahmins returning from Bali's sacrificial site, that there is none who can excel the Daitya King in munificence; and whatever gifts are sought, he grants in an overflowing measure. Vamana takes leave of his parents and with their blessings wends his way to the site where Bali is performing the sacrificial rite. What a pity that the Lord, who bears the goddess of wealth and affluence on His chest, degrades Himself into the lowly position of a beggar! But He cares not. It is not for Himself that He begs; He does it to do good to 12)

Devendra, to release him from years of sore degradation and misery and to check the ascendancy of the arrogant and wicked Daityas. To seek a favour from a competent person for rendering good to others, and not for self-aggrandisement, is no blot, no disgrace. Rather, such mendicancy redounds to the glory of the supplicant himself; it glows like a feather in his cap. As Vamana enters the sacrificial site, the multitudes of scholars assembled there are struck with astonishment at his radiance, and wonder who he could be—Siva, Hari, Brahma, Surya or Agni. None among the Brahmins can have such effulgence and such charm. Vamana moves freely among the various groups occupied with the recital of Vedic hymns and engaged in the performance of sacrificial rites; he enters into disputations with some, joins some others in the recital of ritual strains, actively takes part in the performance of oblations; amuses some with witticisms, enlightens others upon some unfamiliar aspects of the holy ceremonies; he enjoys this sport, while the spectators are amazed at his versatility, his multi-faceted genius.

8. Vamana's Strategy :

The pseudo-mendicant approaches Bali and pays him a handsome compliment : "Here is the glorious Danava Emperor, the great Vanquisher of the Celestial lords (Indra, Yama, Agni, Vayu) and other dignitaries, the renowned Performer of innumerable sacrificial rites, the gracious Bestower of manifold gifts in an unstinted measure, the stern Upholder of truth, virtue and righteousness. Behold this magnificent Ruler of the three worlds, whose every word is honoured as law and obeyed as command, whose every smile is a dagger piercing the heart of the celestial lord, whose every scowl signifies the falling off of the marital-bands of the celestial ladies; whose every step reverberates the sanctity of the solemn and auspicious rites and their benediction. May he ever thrive with affluence and prosperity ! May his name ever shine with fame and glory !" Bali receives the benediction with bowed head and joined hands. He extends to him the hospitality due to honoured guests, washes his feet in all humility and sprinkles the water on his head; but he knows not that it is the same water that Siva has felt privileged and proud to hold in his matted locks. Bali

makes eager enquiries about Vamana's parentage and place of residence; he frankly admits that by his gracious advent he has sanctified Bali's heritage and birth, brought his auspicious rites to fruition, and fulfilled his aspirations beyond all calculations. He entreats the visitor to mention what he wishes to have - fine linen, sumptuous tasty food, fruits or other forest produce, gold, gems, pearls or money, houses, maidens, ornaments, cows, horses, chariots, cultivable lands, villages or extensive dominions - or whatever strikes his fancy or satisfies his need - and he will be pleased to meet them in full measure. To this kind enquiry and munificent offer, Vamana renders a gentle and palpably innocent answer: "How can I mention any particular place as my residence when I fill every place; how can I specify to whom I belong when I depend on none but move about with absolute freedom? How can I indicate the subject of my specialised study when I am equally adept in all branches of knowledge? Take it from me that time and space cannot restrict or control my conduct; that I am alone and have no kith and kin; that none is an outsider for me and I cling to those who are good and virtuous. I shall not dwell upon this matter further. Let us leave it at that." Vamana sings a paeon of praise on the glorious ancestry of the Danava King: "What you have said is quite right, truly virtuous, and is in keeping with the tradition of your line of descent. All your ancestors are magnanimous and munificent, There is none who has marred the fair name of the family by cowardice or miserliness, Your grandfather, Prahlada, shines, like the bright moon amidst stars, spreading the mellow rays of Danava reputation. Your great grandfather's brother, Hiranyaksha, proved himself to be the Victor of all the worlds by his unequalled might and prowess. When he carried off the Earth like a bed-rol to the nether region. Vishnu assumed the form of a boar and killed him to avert the disaster. Your great grandfather, Hiranyakasipu took umbrage at this and went in pursuit of Hari to avenge his brother's death. Finding that the time was not propitious to engage the furious Danava in fight, Hari exercised his skill in throwing a veil of delusion and assumed a Subtle Form and made entry into his bosom through the passage of inhaling breath. Hiranyakasipu made a thorough search over all

the worlds and found him not. He concluded that his enemy was dead; and that, if alive, he could not have escaped detection and that it was futile to entertain animosity against one who was no more. Let me not dilate upon his other qualities. How magnanimous was your father in his gifts and charities to Brahmins ! He could refuse nothing that was sought from him, even if it be his very life-breath. When Indra and other celestials presented themselves as Brahmin mendicants in great peril and craved for his life-breath, which alone could save them, your father acquiesced in their request without any hesitation and gifted it away with pleasure. Could self-abnegation go any further ? You are a chip of the old block. You have driven out the celestials from their holdings; you have established sovereignty over all the worlds. You have equalled your ancestors in the magnitude of your charities. Of what avail is kingdom, of what value is affluence, if they are not employed for the good of worthy Brahmins, learned men and deserving solicitors of aid ? Knowing fully well that you are the Lord of the three worlds and that you have been dispensing favours without stint and on a munificent scale all along, I have refrained from drawing upon your generous goodwill. After all, what do I, a lonely single person, need ? I need no money. If you are pleased to grant me a pace and two, I shall deem it as a favour, equal to the bestowal of the entire universe on me”.

Bali is not at all impressed with Vamana's request for a petty favour of three paces. Having decided to ask for a gift should not the seeker demand something commensurate with the patron's stature and affluence ? If the little Brahmachari has wished to have an extensive domain of fertile land or herds of elephants or horses or kine, or a bunch of charming maidens, the Emperor will have condescended to gift them with pleasure. How can the Lord of all the worlds compromise his stature and dignity by bestowing a mere trifle ? The very thought is degrading, demeaning. But the mendicant is not so simple and innocent as the donor thinks. A gentle smile plays upon his lips, when he tells the Emperor that all that a bachelor like him needs are : a water-jug, a staff, an umbrella, a sacred thread, a waist-band, a sheath of kusa grass; and that plots

of land or elephants or horses or maidens do not fit in with the way of life prescribed for him. He further observes that desire has no end; the more one has, the more one craves for; and that he who feels contented with whatever comes his way is blessed; and that none can have the happiness and peace he enjoys. He holds, moreover, that it is highly improper for a person to ask for more than what is necessary for him, simply because the patron has ample resources at his command and is generous in disposition. Vamana tells Bali that he will be immensely gratified if the Emperor grants his request without denying it.

9. Sukra's warning and Bali's rejection :

The Emperor gets ready to make the gift. His preceptor Sukra intervenes at this juncture and advises him to desist from it. He declares : "Vamana is no Brahmin mendicant. He is Vishnu, who has taken birth as the son of Aditi and Kasyapa, and come with purpose to deprive you of your sovereignty and affluence and invest Indra with them. Let me caution you that once you make over the three paces he wants, he will occupy the entire universe and leave you a pauper. No sin attaches to one who withdraws his promise when its redemption involves self-ruin. A righteous person is expected to divide his wealth into five parts and spend it equally for *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, fame and dependents; and it is not fair to ignore or neglect personal interest altogether. The Code of conduct lays down that in certain circumstances, such as giving protection to the cows and the high-born or extricating people from danger to life, to wealth or purity, uttering a lie carries no stain. It is up to you to resist this fraud perpetrated by Vishnu on an unsuspecting donor; for, if you yield, this gift will involve you in utter ruin." Bali listens to this exhortation with all reverence; he knows that it is the preceptor's solicitude for his well-being that has prompted him to intervene. But he is not impressed. He feels that righteousness demands that he should keep his word, whatever the cost. He makes a humble submission,

countering the plea of his master. "Revered Sir, what you have said is quite true; it is the *dharma* that a house-holder should observe. But, pray, consider how I can resile from a commitment that I have made to this deserving supplicant. To deny a promised gift is an unpardonable crime. Has not Mother Earth declared before Brahma that she can bear with patience the worst criminal but not one who violates truth, who goes back upon his word? It is worse than death to men of honour, if they turn their backs on the enemy in battle or fail to redeem their promises. What greater privilege can a donor expect to enjoy than the availability of a worthy recipient and of adequate resources to meet his expectations? Numerous rulers of vast kingdoms in the past have revelled in the glory of their possessions; where are they now? They are now extinct; they have left no trace behind them. Emperors like Sibi who have cared to observe *dharma*, who have gladly made sacrifices in redeeming their commitments, are rare exceptions; but their names are remembered by successive generations for their exemplary virtue of adherence to truth. If the present supplicant be the Supreme One, (who is beyond the reach of performers of incessant rites and devotional exercises) who now voluntarily dwarfs His majesty into humble mendicancy, does not the redemption of the promise become all the more obligatory? Does not the bestowal redound to the glory of the donor? Imagine for a moment the auspicious hand, that has fondled and played sport with the enchanting form and lovely features of the Divine Consort, Lakshmi, stretched in solicitation of favour lying below and my palm placed above it in the act of granting it! Could any one so far enjoy such supremacy? Could kingdom, affluence, power, even life, which are all evanescent bubbles, stand comparison with this invaluable privilege which establishes a lasting glory? I may lose my suzerainty; I may be deprived of my kingdom; my race may be exterminated; I may be exposed to tragic death or bound and thrown into Hell. Come what may! My tongue refuses to unsay what it has already uttered. Does it really matter who the supplicant is—Brahma or Hara or Vishnu? Granting that he is, as you say,

Vishnu in disguise, will he punish me, bind me with chains for my adherence to truth and *dharma*? If he is true to himself, he will release me; it matters little for me even if he does not. Let me make this declaration that I stand by my promise and shall redeem it even if, as a consequence, the majestic Meru turns topsy-turvy, the vast ocean runs dry, the entire earth splinters into tiny particles, and the starry heaven becomes immobile and paralysed. Here before me is a dwarfish lad who tells me that he is lonely and forlorn, with no parents, brothers or kith and kin to take care of him, that he is versatile in all branches of learning and an adept in the essentials of all knowledge, that he is loth to imploring alms from others but that he has come to me alone for a small favour. Pardon, revered Sir, I do not have the heart to refuse what this lad wants".

Bali has risen in stature to unattainable heights by his strict adherence to truth and righteousness, by his resolute will to redeem plighted word, by his high-minded selflessness in the bestowal of gifts. But Sukra is not impressed, even because his advice, prompted by his solicitude for the Danava King and race and realm, has been set at naught. The homily that Bali has addressed to him puts him in a rage and he pronounces a curse on him that ere long he suffers an ignoble fall. Bali is undeterred. How exceptionally fortunate Bali is in that he is privileged to wash the auspicious feet of the Lord — feet which the Yogis try hard to reach by concentrated contemplation, feet which smell fragrant by the smear of musk received from the forehead of his prostrating Consort, feet which are adorned with Vedas as anklets, feet which provide refuge and protection to the celestial hordes, feet which secure release to aspiring devotees from bondage to the cycle of birth-and-death! He invites Vamana to accept the gift, beckons to the Queen, Vindhyavali, to fetch the gold jug of water and, as the donee places his feet in the gold plate, he washes them and sprinkles the cleansing water on his head and declares: "Great guest, O Vishnu in the form of this radiant Brahmin, I reverently make over the three paces of earth under the authority of Vedic rites and for the pleasure this

acceptable act gives Brahma." Vamana admires Bali for his resolve and tells him that no charity equals a land-gift in value. He stretches his palm to receive the oblation of sacred Kusa water; but Sukra gets into the spout of the jug and prevents the flow; and Vamana clears the obstacle by poking the hole with a blade of Kusa. Sukra withdraws with a bleeding eye. Now the water flows freely from the jug held by the Queen into her lord's hand and then descends into Vamana's, thus completing the oblation. Bali's act of benevolence is universally acclaimed; the sages and celestials, Yakshas and Vidya-dharas, Pannagas and Tarkshyas, join in a chorus of praise and rain flowers on him in joy. Here is an outstanding benefactor who is fully aware of the nature of time, place and circumstance, who knows that Vishnu is the pseudo-mendicant and who is forewarned by his preceptor that to oblige him is to invite ruin; yet, he resolves to discharge his obligation to a worthy beneficiary whatever be the consequences. He would rather die than allow his honour to be defiled. Could any philanthropist stand comparison with him? Bali is the first and the foremost, with no near second in the field of philanthropic activity, except perhaps Karna. It is only after Bali commits himself to grant Vamana's wish that Sukracharya intervenes and advises the King to resile from his pledge. Bali rejects the suggestion, preferring death to dishonour. But Karna is forewarned by Surya of Indra's manoeuvre to obtain his armour and ear-pendants (which are his native endowments from birth) in order to shatter his life-ambition of overcoming Arjuna in fight. Karna knows that the Brahmin supplicant before him is no other than Indra in disguise. Yet, he does not hesitate to make the sacrifice of the coveted armour and even of precious life by readily conferring on Indra the gift he has asked for. Thus he appears to be in close affinity with Bali as a reputed donor, undefiled by lapse or neglect.

10. The cosmic manifestation :

Why does Hari become a manikin? Could it be that the sight of the miserable grief-stricken Indra has depressed

him so badly as to shrink Him into a dwarf? Or could it more probably be that His recognition and appreciation of Bali's magnificent munificence, unprecedented in its content, range and magnitude, has expressed itself in self-stultifying stature? Whatever be the underlying cause for His assumption of this particular form, Vamana has no need to continue his pretence. The joy that his mission has borne fruit surges so high as to fill the whole world and make him Trivikrama. The time has come to unveil his real nature. He grows in stature; as he expands further and further, he crosses the aerial zone, he goes beyond the region of clouds, he clears the starry firmament; in the process of growth, Surya sinks gradually from the position of an umbrella to that of a crown-gem, an ear-stud, a necklace, a bracelet, an armlet, a waist-band, an anklet and finally, a footstool. Very soon, Vishnu fills the entire earth, heaven and ocean; not content with that, he rises to higher altitudes and occupies the upper regions of Bhuvārloka, Svārloka, Mahārloka, Janārloka, Tapoloka and Satyārloka. Here is a magnificent Cosmic manifestation of Vishnu as Viśvarūpa; with Rasātala (nether world) under His footstool, Mahi at His feet, Mahindhra at His heel (*Jaṅgha*) Patātrisamudaya at His knee (*januvu*), Indrasena and Marudganas at His thighs, Sandhya at his posteriors, Prajapatis at His genitals, Danujas at His lips, Nabha at His navel, the Seven seas in His abdomen, the starry firmament above His stomach, Rita and Satya on His nipples, Dharma in His heart, Chandra in His mind, Lakshmi on His chest, the Vedas around His throat, Indra and other celestial lords on His shoulders, Disas (*quarters*) near about His ears, aerial space (*ākasa*) encircling His head, clouds (*meghas*) playing on His locks, vital airs near His nostrils, Surya in His eyes, Agni on His face (*vadana*), Chandasamudaya (Literature and Fine arts) in His voice (*vani*), Jalesa (*samudra*) on His palate, Vidhi nishedhas (duties prescribed and forbidden) on His brows, day and night in His eye-lids, Anger on His forehead, Greed on His nether-lip, Kama (Passion) on His sensation of touch, Water on His semen, Adharma (unrighteousness) on His pelvis (*prustha*), Yajna on His foot

(*Kramana*), Death on His shadow, mysterious illusions about His smile, medicinal plants from His hairs, rivers about His nerve-centres, rocks on His nails, Brahma in His intellect, divine sages about His vital airs, animal and plant species about His neck, what a glorious Cosmic manifestation! The Supreme is clad in purple silk, is equipped with the potent weapons—conch, discus, bow, mace, sword, quivers of arrows—and is adorned with crown, ear-rings, gold chains, armlets, diamonds and gems, waist-bands and anklets; and is attended upon by a host of servitors in glittering attire — how resplendent and fascinating He looks! One of His feet appears as a Lotus resting on a piece of mound, the Earth; and the other looks as the lotus blooming with a bee nestling in it; and the light radiating from the nails of the Lord's raised foot has not only eclipsed the bright rays of the sun but thrown into shade the effulgence of Brahma himself. The denizens of Brahmaloka, those who have secured release from *samsara*, saintly kings like Marichi, great sages like Sananda, and scholars well-versed in Vedas, Sastras, Puranas and Dharma Samhitas, who have through the fire of spiritual knowledge and practice reduced the pile of Karma to ashes—find to their great joy the Lord's foot before them, the treasure they have all along been aspiring for — Brahma becomes ecstatic that he has rediscovered in the Lord's foot his place of birth, the Lotus, and reverently washes it with the pure water in his jug. This oblation of Brahma turns into the sacred river Ganga with a divine halo about her. Jambavan, the lord of the bears, is elated by this magnificent vision and circumambulates the Supreme. The residents of Brahmaloka exercise their yogic powers and secure on the spot various flowers, garlands of basil, sandal-paste, scented-sticks, camphor, fried paddy, rice, coconuts, plantains and other fruits and use them for worship of the Lord and sing praises and raise slogans proclaiming His victory. This Cosmic Vision into which Vamana has transformed himself numbs the mind and staggers imagination and plunges Bali and his associates into mute wonder and extreme perplexity. Struck with awe, they too join the admiring spectators in praising the Lord.

11. The donor in debt :

Of the three paces granted to him, Vamana has in two paces covered all the worlds; and Bali is now in debt as he has not given full satisfaction; one more pace is due to the donee. The Cosmic Form withdraws, and Vamana stands there seeking fulfilment of Bali's pledge. The Daityas, Danavas, Rakshasas, now raise a hue and cry that Bali has been duped. They find nothing wrong with Bali; he has merely redeemed his promise. But they charge that Vamana is a deliberate crook; that he has planned the whole stratagem to bring about the ruin of Bali and employed fraudulent means to accomplish it. They declare that he should not be spared; he must be brought to book at once. So they hasten to arm themselves and marshal their armies into battle array on all sides. Noticing the Rakshasas' preparation, the commanders of Vishnu devotees lose no time in summoning their forces to get ready with their arms and weapons to face the menace posed by the enemy. In this critical situation, Bali steps in to counsel and admonish his supporters to desist from their attempt. Wisdom, prudence, statesmanship, faith in an all-regulating Providence, surrender to an all-powerful Supreme, combine to make his exhortation impressive and fruitful. "Dear and esteemed friends, this is no time for confrontation. How can we resist when the Lord of all lives and Dispenser of joys and sorrows is not now inclined in our favour? We won a victory over the celestials when He smiled on us. We must bide our time and not swim against the current of His frown. A ruler may have all resources—vast armies, talented generals, wise counsellors, impregnable forts, abundant granaries, large stacks of weapons—but he should weigh the pros and cons, consider how far the times and circumstances are congenial and adopt such means as will prove effective. This is no time to risk a war; we have to lie low and seek for peace." The Rakshasa hordes withdraw from the scene.

12. Bali redeems his promise :

Vamana looks meaningfully at Garuda and the latter astens the hands and feet of Bali with *Varunapasa*, the sacred

rope used in sacrificial ceremonies. Bali faces this humiliation with unruffled calm. He shows no trace of sadness, no loss of nerve; rather, he displays outstanding determination and remarkable courage, ample wisdom and deep stoical resignation, in accepting the miserable situation as Providential decree. Vamana arraigns Bali: "O Danava ! You have gifted me three paces of space : all the regions of earth put together could find room for a single pace; all the celestial regions acquired by conquest are covered by my second pace; all your possessions are exhausted with these two paces. Show me provision for the third pace; if you do not, you become guilty of breaking promise and deserve hell for punishment. Even Brahma cannot commit such breach with impunity." Bali is inwardly torn with agony at the prospect of being damned as a promise-breaker; yet he regains composure and makes a dignified reply to this uncharitable threat. "Nothing but truth can my tongue utter; I am incapable of speaking untruth; falsehood does not agree with my constitution. O Pure One ! I offer my head and entreat you to put your foot on it and discharge me from the obligation. Lord, I care little for the loss of sovereignty, kingdom and affluence; I do not worry about the sorrows that crowd round me; I can take in my stride humiliations and insults. What I fear most is uttering a lie. What harm can there be in the punishments meted out by parents and preceptors, well-wishers and friends ? Do they not yield good results ? Lord, you are the Preceptor of preceptors, Adiguru. When you bind me, I feel no shame, no degradation, no pain; you know when to reward and when to punish. Did not the stalwarts of our race choose the path of hostility to you in the past and tenaciously carry on the fight to the bitter end — only to reap the reward that your devotees earn after years and years of sustained spiritual endeavours. It is crass stupidity to think that worldly life is real and to get entangled in it, forgetting the value of virtues like truth, righteousness, kindness, love and charity. If my grandfather Prahlada rebelled against his father, Hiranyakasipu, and took refuge at your feet, was it not because he reckoned that this body was liable to perish and that the swift passage of time drew death nearer; and realised that wealth and affluence were evanescent, that women and

children, kith and kin, friends and acquaintances, were so many factors pushing a person into the inextricable snare of *samsara* from which there could be no escape? He was a blessed person; he could thus get life secure from death. My ancestors could not attain you except by consistent hostility and confrontation. Is it not my exceptional fortune that *You should come to me, that too, as a supplicant for a favour?*" Bali, the vanquished, is more magnificent than Bali, the victor. Bali, the humble penitent is more impressive than Bali, the imperious donor. At this point, it is worthwhile considering the significance of Bali suggesting that Vamana may place his foot on his head and thus receive full satisfaction. With two paces Vamana has occupied all the worlds under Bali and wants him to show room for the third pace. Bali now has *nothing* that he can call his own, as all his possessions are taken away. What he can still claim to be his, is his body and so he surrenders it to Vamana. The idea of *mine* (*mamakaara*) is knocked out; there still lingers the concept of *I* (*ahamkaara*). Bali will be free from egoism if Vamana rests his foot on his head. The purpose of Vamana is not to destroy Bali but make him realise that he is not the owner and proprietor of the worlds; that they belong to the Supreme and that Bali is allowed to enjoy them for a time. But Bali has believed that the worlds are *his* and that he has conquered them. Vamana has proved to him that what he has considered as his possessions are *not his now*; Vamana has assumed proprietorship over them by occupying them with his two paces. Now they belong to Vamana. Bali is left with one claim, that his body and mind are still his and so makes the offer to Vamana to occupy them. When Vamana accepts it, Bali is left with *nothing* that he can call his. Bali is no longer an independent individual; he is now one of the possessions of Vamana. Egoism (*ahamkaara*) and possessiveness (*mamakaara*) are now extinguished. Bali is now in the position of one who has surrendered *himself*, and what he has considered *his*, to Vamana; and thus he has acquired the status of an accomplished devotee. It is now Vamana's obligation to protect and sustain what is *his own*.

13. Petitioners for mercy intervene :

It looks strange that, Pahlada makes his appearance on the scene; Bali is highly pleased to see his grandfather, a devotee without equal, beaming with gentleness and purity. As he is bound, he is unable to greet him with the usual reverent prostration; he humbly bows to him in salutation. Noticing Vamana, Pahlada prostrates before him; tears of joy well up in his eyes; ecstasy bubbles up and becomes visible in the shivers of his body. He addresses the Lord and showers praises on Him : "Sire, it is your grace that has once made Bali the Lord of *Swarga*; and when affluence and power have generated arrogance in him and warped the functioning of the faculties and workings of the mind, it is again your grace that has humbled his pride and made him realise the emptiness of worldly possessions. Of what worth is the glamorous throne of Indra to one who knows the Reality, who rejoices in service at your Footstool ?" Mustering courage from the presence of Pahlada, the wife of Bali, VindhyaVali, advances to make her entreaty to the Lord. She presents a pathetic picture; grief has crumbled her; she is like Niobe, drenched in tears; her husband's sudden and precipitous fall from the exalted throne into abject ignoble fetters, has crashed her into a stoop. With head bent and arms joined at the heart in salutation, she prays that the gracious Lord may relent and give her back her husband. "It is true that people in the world claim ownership over worlds forgetting that they are yours and that you have created them for your sport. But my husband has not denied his commitment; he has not resiled from his promise; he has freely bestowed on you all that he has. What more can he possibly do ? Why keep him in fetters ? O Enchanter of the heart of Lakshmi, O Saviour of aspirants, Benefactor of all dependents; pray, be merciful !" Now it is the turn of Brahma to put in a plea in support of Pahlada and VindhyaVali : "Supreme Lord, Bali has surrendered all that he has and thus discharged his pledge. He has committed no lapse; he does not deserve punishment. On the other hand, he is a philanthropist who stints not, who shies at nothing; it is not fair to keep in fetters a great devotee who has washed your feet and sprinkled the

sacred water on his head and made over to you all his possessions. He deserves mercy. Pray, release him."

14. Vamana's gracious response :

Vamana now responds to their joint pleas and combined prayers. "Know Ye, for certain, that I rob the person, whom I wish to favour, of all that he calls his own. That person who is mad after wealth, power and other worldly possessions, gets caught in the whirligig of *samsara*, passes through numerous births till wisdom dawns on him; then he realises the hollowness and the transitoriness of worldly acquisitions, and the vanity of youth, beauty and virility; he is shorn of all egoism and becomes chastened in mind and looks up to me for relief and support. Such an orientation is an invitation to my intervention. I step in to assure him of protection and sustenance. Thereafter, there can be no fall, no grief. Look at Bali ! His kingdom is forfeit; his affluence is gone; he is deserted by kith and kin; he is forlorn; he is in chains: he is under his preceptor's curse; yet, in all this degradation and ruin, he has not strayed from virtue; he has adhered to truth; he has clung to purity; he has stuck to his promise; with knowledge undefiled, he has overcome the illusory attractions of life. How is he mean and despicable ? I have plied him hard and driven him to extreme misery, only to test his worth. How admirable are his great fortitude, his staunch rectitude, his sterling worth !" Turning to Bali, Vamana observes : "O Indrasena Maharajah, none can excel you as the dispenser of benefactions in content, variety, magnitude and extent. May you rule over the domain of Sutala of which even celestials are jealous! It is a land of peace and plenty, a region free from cares and anxieties, hardships and sorrows and inaccessible to kings of the worlds. Your word shall be the law; who dare defy it shall run the risk of exposure to my disc. I shall be there whenever you think of me and give you protection. Contemplation of me cleanses you of all demoniac propensities in course of time." Bali is elated with this nectarine pronouncement; tears of joy trickle down his face and thrills spread over the body and limbs as he expresses his gratitude for His gracious favour.

He is freed from the shackles; he prostrates before Hari, salutes Brahma and Hara, and prepares to leave for Sutala with his retinue. Prahlada is beside himself with joy that his grandson should be the recipient of a benediction—a blessing beyond the reach of even Brahma and Siva, His ardent devotees — by which Hari undertakes to be the guard of Bali's fort. He praises the Lord : "We are low-born, mean-minded, ignoramuses, without any merit of penance to our credit. We belong to a race in whom the demoniac qualities preponderate. In what way do we deserve these gracious favours? You are the Immanent One, the Passive witness, the Impartial Judge: Yet, you shower favours on those who are devoted to you and withhold them from those towards whom you are not inclined. It is strange that your love flows towards us and make us blessed. Who can understand, much less delve into, your mysterious ways? How magnanimous of you that you should volunteer to protect us and keep vigil over our interests!" The Supreme Lord now commands Prahlada to lead his grandson and his attendant hordes to Sutala. He then turns to Sukracharya and tells him to continue the sacrificial rite from where it has suffered a break and complete it as prescribed in the Vedas. The evil effects of a broken ritual will be neutralised when the Brahmins come forward to carry it to fruition. Sukra extols Him as Lord who presides over all Vedic rites and sacrifices and observes that when He is present and satisfied, no lapses can vitiate the performance. Still, in obedience to His command he completes Bali's Yajna with the help of other Brahmins.

Brahma, in the company of Siva and Kumara, Daksha and Bhrigu, celestials, sages and holy mores (*pitruganas*), makes the proclamation that Vamana is the Lord of all lords and that he is the Principal Authority presiding over Righteousness (*dharma*), Affluence (*aiswarya*) Fame (*yasas*), wealth (*Lakshmi*), auspicious occurrences (*Subha*), scriptures (*Vedas*) celestial regions and spiritual domains (*swargapavarga*), All the assembled dignitaries proceed to Amaravati, where Vamana makes over to Indra the sovereignty over the celestial kingdom, much to the joy of Aditi. A mother's happiness does

not depend on the number of offspring she brings forth. Even if it be a single son, provided he is competent to fulfil her wish, the mother feels blessed and her heart is filled with inexpressible joy. Few mothers can have such fulfilment as Aditi has. Here is a younger brother who obtains the three worlds by seeking alms and makes them over to the elder one without asking for a share, (let alone disputing its equitability) and without entertaining any wish to rule. Which brother can match Indra in having such exceptional good fortune? With the Supreme Person for a brother, how can Indra lack any thing, how can any wish remain unfulfilled ?

15. Conclusion :

In this confrontation between Bali and Vamana, who is the victor ? This question looks absurd. It is doubtless that Vamana comes out victorious. He has beaten Bali through and through; deprived him of his possessions, of his power, of his sovereignty and made him a pauper. He comes to the Emperor as a supplicant; and one who solicits a favour naturally loses self-respect and looks small in the eyes of the world. Even the Supreme Person in such situation loses all His magnificent stature and becomes a dwarf, a Vamana. But He manages to turn the tables at the end. The positions are reversed : the imperious donor forfeits all that he calls his own and becomes naught. The lowly supplicant gains in stature and establishes his supremacy over the universe and becomes All-in-all. Thus Vamana has proved that he is the victor. But is that all ? Bali, vanquished, humiliated and bound, rises to greater heights of nobility. When Vamana pins him to his commitment, Bali responds admirably. He sticks to his promise and adheres to truth and righteousness. He prefers annihilation to dishonour and shows Vamana room for his third pace on his head. Self-abnegation reaches its climax. With this, Bali's *Viswajityajna* reaches culmination. He has nothing that he can claim as his own, not even his body and mind. He realises that true happiness lies in consecrating all works (*karmanu*) all pleasures (*bhogamulu*), all oblations and offerings made in sacred fires (*homamulu*), all gifts and charities (*danadharmamulu*), all penances and spiritual exercises

14)

(*tapassu, saadhanalu*), to the all-knowing and gracious Lord. *Yat karosi, yadasnasi, yajjuhosi dadasiyat yat tapasyasi; Kounteya, tat Kurushva madarpanam.* It is a total surrender, a state which is inconceivable to the demoniac race in which *rajasic* and *tamasic* qualities predominate, a state which is inaccessible even to the avowed devotees of God except for the elect few. Bali, the Danava King now proves to be a Victor; he has overcome both possessiveness and egoism. "I am not mine but His". With this victory over himself, he has become the Lord's possession : And it is for Him to take care of Bali. That is how he has scored a victory over the Supreme. But Bali does *not* remind Hari of His commitment to those who give up all and depend on Him alone as sole refuge. He need not have to do it. And the all-knowing Vamana reacts in a handsome manner. He acknowledges His obligation, makes Bali the ruler of Sutala, and undertakes to protect him. He goes a step further and tells Bali that He is at his command and that he can summon Him at will. Armed with mace and discus, the Lord keeps guard at the entrance of Bali's fort. Lord Vishnu has had to employ a subtle device, though not a fraudulent trick, to triumph over the Danava Emperor; but Bali adopts the open method of submission and renunciation of self to gain victory over the Supreme. Bali offers his head to be trampled upon so as to redeem his promise in full. Vamana gladly accepts the offer and receives full satisfaction. And what is the result? The vanquished Bali becomes the crowned Lord of Sutala and the victor Vamana is content to remain a Guard at his fort. Both are victors.....but whose victory is more glorious....the Deity's or the devotee's ? It looks as though the Lord takes pleasure in contriving things in such a way as to yield the pride of place to His devotee !



III - KRISHNA'S BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

III (i) - 12 SRI KRISHNA JANANAM

(Incarnation of Sri Krishna)

Innumerable Daityas rose to power and became a heavy burden to the Earth by their wanton acts of wickedness. Driven to the extreme of misery, Bhudevi assumed the form of a cow and set up a wail of her sufferings and sought redemption from them. Brahma consoled her and led her along with the celestial lords to Vaikuntha to secure redressal from Vishnu. Brahma set himself to solemn contemplation and soon reached a stage of oneness with the Infinite, when he heard a few words directing him as to what they should do in those circumstances. Brahma came out of the trance, and conveyed the Lord's message that the celestials should take birth among the Yadavas, and that Hari would incarnate as the son of Vasudeva and redeem the world of all its ills. It was also ordained that Maaya, the mysterious power of the Lord, should play a significant role and that Seshu should act as the elder brother; in this grand design of providing relief to the suffering world by eliminating the demoniac forces. Bhudevi and the Suranayakas were happy that their griefs would come to an end soon.

Surasena was the lord of the Yadavas; and he held sway over his realm with Mathura for his capital. Vasudeva was his worthy son. Ugrasena of Bhojavamsa, gave his daughter, Devaki, in marriage to Vasudeva and bestowed numerous gifts on the bride. Kamsa was very happy at the wedding of his sister with his intimate friend; and in his joy offered to take the bridal couple in his chariot to their destination. On the way, he heard an unseen Voice cautioning him that his present joyous enthusiasm for his sister's happiness would ultimately result in his own ruin, for her eighth issue would cause his death. Deeply stirred and agitated at this declaration, Kamsa drew his sword, dragged his sister down by the hair and got ready to cut off her head. Mad fury displaced all his fondness

for his sister; for she became the potential danger to his life. Vasudeva now stepped in and made an effort to pacify him by an appeal to his reason and other nobler instincts : "You are her brother; and it is natural for a brother to make his sister happy with soothing words and with generous gifts; instead, you get ready to kill her, putting your trust in the words of the mysterious Voice. I request you to desist from this outrage. You know your sister; she is weak, innocent and has your interests always at heart. You are of noble descent. You are wise. I entreat you to think for a while and consider how far it is right to cut off your sister's life in a fit of frenzy. You know well how evil actions (*dushkarmas*) produce ill effects; and to perpetrate evil for others in the hope that it yields us good is the height of unwisdom, as it will certainly recoil on us. O mighty Kamsa, I earnestly pray that you will generously give protection to your beloved sister (whom you should treat as your daughter), a virtuous and praiseworthy young bride, now pitiable and terribly shaken with fear." Vasudeva realised that his appeal failed to move Kamsa, whose looks still rained sparks of fire. To save his wife's life was the imperative need. To this end, Vasudeva humbled himself before Kamsa, explained to him that Devaki herself spelt no danger to him, that the threat came from their children; and to obviate such a contingency, he was prepared to offer each newborn child to Kamsa to dispose it as he pleased. Kamsa was impressed and pleased with Vasudeva's pleading and released his sister from his hold. It will be pertinent here to pause and reflect on the deeper significance of this incident. Scholars suggest that the marriage of Vasudeva and Devaki represents the union respectively of Jeevatma (the individual self and Saattvika Buddhi (the enlightened intellect) and that it culminates in the emergence of Krishna (the Supreme), the Purveyor of universal good (Viswa Sreyas). Kamsa personifies Manas (the mind) which is suffused with egoism and possessiveness (*ahamkara and mamakara*) and close attachment and acid revulsion (*raaga and dvesha*) and which is subject to unpredictable fluctuations, on account of the constant turmoil of the three fundamental qualities (*sattva, rajas and tamas*) contending for supremacy. Kaalanemi is reborn as Kamsa; Kaala is a

wheel and *nemi* is its rim; without the rim the wheel cannot move; and the rim which facilitates movement is Kaama (desire). Thus Kamsa represents unending and extravagant desire in all its intensity and extensiveness. Kaama is under the influence of *sattvic guna*, a noble impulse, when it rejoices in the union of Jeevatma and Buddhi; but when the Invisible Voice (*Veda*) declares that its very existence is threatened by an issue of that union, it receives a terrible shock. The innate diabolical elements of *rajas* and *tamas* spurt forth into mad fury and attempt to put an end to Buddhi. It needs all the resources at the command of Jeevatma to save Buddhi from being destroyed; it suggests an *ad hoc* palliative to which the mind succumbs — because of its lack of far-sightedness. The mind postpones action as it is not the mother (*Buddhi*) that poses the threat but only her issue (the Supreme). In course of time, Devaki gave birth to a son; and Vasudeva, true to his word, presented him before Kamsa; and the latter appreciated his uprightness and told him that he might take back the child, as he posed no danger; and that he would kill the eighth son only, as he would, according to the prophecy, cause his death. Vasudeva returned home; but he had no peace; for there was no certainty that the volatile Kamsa would not change his mind. He was right in entertaining this suspicion. Narada happened to visit Kamsa; and he informed him that the Yadavas including Vasudeva and Devaki, and Nanda and his relatives and retinue, were all celestials in human form; and cautioned him that Hari would take birth as a child of Devaki and Vasudeva and bring about the destruction of Kamsa and all the Daityas. Kamsa became furious; he threw his sister and Vasudeva into prison and massacred their six children; he dethroned his father Ugrasena and put him behind bars. He declared himself King and ruled the country with an iron hand. What heinous crimes would love of life and greed for power desist from committing? Reckless and inordinate ambition would throw overboard filial and fraternal affinities, and attachments to kith and kin. All cherished values and sentiments would become the foremost casualties in this vile course of self-aggrandisement. Kamsa mustered his forces and in consultation with his demoniac colleagues cruelly harassed

the Yadavas to such an extent that most of them were forced to flee their lands and seek shelter in the neighbouring states of Kuru, Kosala, Nishadha, Videha, Vidarbha, Kekaya, Panchala, Salva etc. A few, however, surrendered and remained behind to serve Kamsa.

In course of time, Devaki conceived for the seventh time. Hari summoned Yoga Maaya and told her that she should remove the embryo (growing with the *tejas* of Sesa phase of the Lord's manifestation) from Devaki and plant it in the womb of Rohini (one of the wives of Vasudeva) who was residing in Nandavraja. He told her that while He would be born of Devaki later, she should enter Yasoda's womb, so that they might be born simultaneously at their respective places. For the part Yoga Maaya would be playing in this benevolent design, she would, as the gracious bestower of boons and gifts, receive the worship of men and women under different names -- Durga, Bhadra Kali, Vijaya, Vaishnavi, Kumuda, Chandika, Krishna, Maadhavi, Kanyaka, Maaya, Naaraayani, Eesaana, Saarada, Ambika-Yoga Maaya agreed and carried out the mission. Devaki was deemed to have suffered abortion; and Rohini became the mother of a son, variously called as *Balabhadra* because of his immense strength, as *Rama* because of his bewitching charm, as *Sankarshana* because of his birth by implanted foetus (*Garbha Sankarshana*).

A few observations about Yoga Maaya are not irrelevant. Yoga Maaya is Prakriti; she is composed of the three fundamental qualities; she is liable to change. At the time of the Dissolution of the worlds, she is drawn into the Supreme and remains immanent in Him. Hari is changeless (Vikriti); the whole universe and all its creatures are held within Him, the One only without a Second. When He entertains the Will to re-create, His *sankalpa* materialises at once. With Him, wish and its fulfilment are simultaneous. Prakriti emerges from Him, all Jeevatmas take new forms in accordance with the pile of Karmas (actions - good and bad) of previous births; and so on. (2) Yoga Maaya, again, is the mysterious power of the Lord, pressed into service to give effect to the plans devised by Him,

It is on such a mission that she has worked in drawing out the foetus from Devaki's womb and inserting it in Rohini's; and in a later stage she takes birth as a child of Yasoda to coincide with Krishna's birth as a child of Devaki. She plays her role with consummate skill and avid enthusiasm, when she warns Kamsa of the impending danger to his power and life. The foetus inserted in Rohini's womb partakes of the spark (*amsa*) of Ananta, the perpetual servitor of the Lord, who has gained the title of 'Sesha' by his total self-abnegation, by his virile sense of belonging to Him alone, by his dedicating his life to His service, and by his manipulating his body as His bedstead or pillow, as His umbrella or footstool or in such other ways as will cater to His comfort. In the Lord's incarnation as Krishna, Ananta manifests himself as Balarama and stands by him through thick and thin, as he has done as Lakshmana in His incarnation as Rama.

Hari illumined Vasudeva's mind with his radiance and Vasudeva imparted it to Devaki. Now that the Lord who carried the worlds in his abdomen was growing like the morning sun within her womb, Devaki shone with the mellow brightness of the full moon. The changes that Devaki's features underwent during the course of pregnancy predicted the downfall of the enemies: the pallor on her face forestalled the fear among the foes; the blackening of her nipples indicated the shadow impinging on their fame; loss of appetite experienced by her reflected the enemies' lack of taste in pleasures; her feeling of discomfort symbolised the panic which seized the demoniac opponents. As the Lord was growing in her womb, the five elements came to pay their attentions to Him and manifested themselves: Jala as drops of sweat, Agni as glow of light, Vaayu as exhalations of breath, Bhoomi as layers of dirt and Aakaasa as widening of the waist; and as the day for delivery approached, the time for enjoyment of marital status for the Daitya women drew to a miserable termination. Imprisoned in her brother's mansion, Devaki was like a bright wick of light confined in a dark pot; still, no impediment could prevent the manifestation of a mellow glow on her body, a charming beauty about her features, a radiant aura around her head.

Kamsa had a look at his sister; he was stunned at her unique radiance; he was convinced that Lord Hari made His entry into her womb. His mind was in a turmoil. He could not countenance the idea of putting an end to his sister's life, not because of any lack of demoniac nerve to kill one so close in consanguinity, but because of fear of incurring notoriety for all time as a cruel murderer of an unprotected helpless woman, and that, too, a sister in a state of advanced pregnancy. Again, he felt that such an unnatural and monstrous crime would bring in its wake loss of longevity and affluence and consignment to hell and its tortures, besides destroying the law of *dharma*, the ethical code of right conduct. This line of thinking brought him to the conclusion that he should spare his sister's life; it stopped short with that and did not extend beyond it. For, he found nothing wrong in killing her children; he would kill this child also the moment he was born. The basis for this conclusion was clear; the threat for his life came *not from his sister but from her son*. Hostility to Hari, who was soon to take birth as his sister's son, became an absorbing passion with him. Eating or drinking, sitting or standing, moving out or in, in whatever activity engaged, Kamsa was always thinking of Hari. Whatever sound struck his ear, he listened to with attention, believing it to be Hari's word; whatever sight crossed his vision, he examined with keenness, suspecting it to be Hari's form: should he but falter and slip during his walk, he wondered if Hari gave him a blow from behind with His fist; if sweet scents pleased his nostrils, he shook with fear that they might have emanated from Hari's garlands. Whatever thoughts crossed his mind, whatever words emerged from his lips, Kamsa associated them with Hari. Thus assaulted with the consciousness of Hari every moment of his life, Kamsa became utterly confused; he did not know how to come out of its vicious grip. A devotee of God would have envied and certainly welcomed such a condition of total absorption in Divine consciousness as a supreme blessing. Not so with Kamsa. What was nectar to God's devotee would seem to be gall and wormwood to His enemy.

Brahma, Siva and Indra and other celestial lords. Naarada and other sages and saints, came to the prison where Devaki and Vasudeva were confined and offered their praises to the Supreme Lord who was to take birth the next day. "Thou art the Source of all the five elements which compose the universe; and Thou art their sustenance and support; and Thou dost absorb them into Thy self and remain Supreme; and Thou dost abide through the past, present and future as the Eternal Sovereign; Thou art the goal which the faithful, the virtuous and the righteous endeavour to attain! We cling to Thee and take refuge in Thee. The ignorant cannot understand Thy mysterious power; yet they reach Thee in different ways of submission and surrender. The wise know Thee as the One without a Second and regard every creature as Thy manifestation. Thou alone dost rear the tree of *Samsara*, sustain it, and control it. None else can do it. (And how magnificent is this Tree with Prakriti for its trunk, and the three Gunas for its roots and Pleasure and Pain for its fruits, the four Purusharthas (Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha), the five sense-organs (the eye, the ear, the nose, the palate and the skin), the six natural tendencies (*sokamohaadi swabhaavamulu*), the seven veins of blood-streams (*dhaatuvulu*), the eight layers (*poralu*) comprising the Panchabhutas (*space, earth, water, air, fire*) mind, intellect, egoism; the nine outlets (*nava randhramulu*), the ten vital airs (*praanadasakam*) — all constituting the different parts of this Tree like the branches, twigs, veins of sap etc.) On this Tree of Samsara, Jiva and Isa perch as birds. Only those who orient their minds towards Thee and consistently tread along Thy path without any deviation, can cross the ocean of samsara with Thy foot, to which they cling, as the safe means of transport. Thou dost invest the good and the virtuous with bodies of auspicious import and thus contribute to the well-being of the world. Some indulge in a vain boast that they know Thee; some others are proud of their proficiency in subjects of no real value; a few others know Thee but dissipate their energies in worthless pursuits. All of them come to grief in the end. Lord, only a select few deem themselves to be Thine, get their minds steadily fixed in their illumined knowledge (*sthita prajna*) and move fearlessly towards

ee and reach fulfilment under Thy grace. Thou art the Self-illuminated One ! Thou art *Sattwaguna*, pure and simple. It is with that characteristic that Thou manifestest Thyself; only those who abide in purity and truth can visualise Thy form and recognise Thy name (Thou who art bereft of birth, karma and guna) and praise and glorify Thee and become Thy devoted servants, a position coveted by all aspirants. For the Self-Manifested Being, taking birth is a mere sport, a means to do good to the world by eliminating the forces of evil. Thou hast assumed the forms of a fish, a turtle, a boar, a lion-man, a dwarfish supplicant, an enchanting Sri Rama — and endured all the attendant troubles — all for the sake of protecting the worlds and redeeming them from the evils of demoniac forces. Such glorious magnanimity attends Thy bounding grace ! We offer our devout salutations to Thee and pray that Thou wouldst emerge from Devaki's womb. The world is immersed in grief; the wicked deeds of Kamsa and his henchmen have gone beyond all limits of endurance. Be merciful and redeem the world of its misery!" The celestials then turned to Devaki and told her : "Blessed lady ! The Supreme Person is in your womb; He will take birth tomorrow. Be assured that Kamsa can do no harm; The Divine Child will be a thorn in Kamsa's side and give him no peace; much good will He confer on us; and the Yadavas will rejoice in His company and thrive under His care." The celestials take their departure after giving their blessings to Vasudeva and Devaki.

As Devaki passed through the throes of child-birth, the minds of the wicked suffered the travails of their guilt. The virtuous found considerable relief from their pangs of suffering. The Divine Child emerged from the mother's womb in the middle of the night, when the planets reached auspicious positions, foreboding good to the world. Clouds roared their happiness; oceans rose to exalted heights out of sheer delight; stars in their excitement illumined the sky with their utmost fulgence; gentle zephyr wafted briskly with refreshing coolness and sweetness; sacrificial fires blazed forth with doubled vigour; lakes displayed their opulence of full-blown lotus blossoms; rivers swelled in glee into a rapid spate;

woods decked themselves with verdant attire and scented inflorescence and delicious fruits; birds filled the air with the chorus of their sweet melodies. The celestials rained flowers; the *gandharvas* sang in ecstasy; and the *apsaras* exulted in tune-ful rhythmic dance. A universal halleluja welcomed the advent of this incarnation of Vishnu in the form of a human child—with the body shining like a sapphire cloud, with four handsome arms holding severally the conch, the disc, the mace and the lotus, with wide eyes like lotus-petals, with a bright red mole on a broad protruding chest (which was decorated with *koustubha* diamond, gold ornaments and flower-garlands), with a purple silk-robe kept in position around the loins by a gold waist-band, with sparkling ear-rings, armlets, wristlets, and anklets, with an effulgent gem-studded gold crown on the head — a marvellous, bewitching manifestation! Vasudeva was beside himself with ecstasy. How infinitely blessed was he to claim the Supreme for his son! He made a *mental* offering of ten thousand milch-cows to the Brahmins, well-versed in the Vedas, as an expression of his gratitude for this favour of God. Vasudeva prostrated before the Divine Child, rose up and joined his hands in salutation and showered praises on Him. "O Lord ! how blessed am I to beget Thee as my son! How mysterious is Thy grace ! Thou art the Eternal One; Thou art the very embodiment of Truth, Effulgence, Benevolence and Bliss; Thou art both the Immanent and the Transcendental Being; this universe is Thy creation; and Thou dost, of Thine own will, enter it in a variety of ways which are incomprehensible even to the sages and saints. In fact, there is nothing like Your entering the world or getting out of it, even because without Thee nothing can exist. Thou art the Original Cause from which the universe has emanated to provide an arena for Thy sport. Thou hast no bonds, external or internal—the whole world is within Thee; nothing exists beyond Thee; Thou art all-pervasive; Thou art the All-in-all. Thou art pleased to come into the world now as my child. How I shudder when I think that Kamsa, who has mercilessly killed my children, will soon arrive here when the servants convey the message of Thy birth and try to falsify the prophecy made by the Invisible Voice that he will meet with death at Thy

hands! How this gloomy prospect of Kamsa's wicked perpetration unnerves me, I cannot express."

Now Devaki raises her voice in praise of Hari : "Lord! Thou art the unchangeable, indefinable, indescribable One; Thou hast no form, no attribute; Thou dost exist as the Self-illuminated Spirit. At the time of Dissolution, the worlds disappear and get lost into the elements; the latter merge into Prakriti; and Prakriti into Vyakta and Vyakta gets absorbed into Avyakta; and it is then that Thou shinest as the Residual Cause. Thou, the Supreme Lord, Thou, the Priceless Treasure, those who know Thee as the close kin of Avidya, as the sportsman whose amusement it is to spend time in playing with the universe, gladly devote themselves to Thy worship. They are really blessed; for they are fearless, they overcome death, they enjoy eternal peace and ineffable bliss. The Yogis claim that they have visioned Thy form; but that is *not* the glorious Original One which we are privileged to witness with our eyes of flesh. I make my humble salutations and entreat Thee to withdraw Thy unique magnificent form. How gracious of Thee that Thou shouldst be pleased to become our son! Imbued with a terrible fear that Thou wouldst take birth as our son, the wicked Kamsa has long kept us in prison and harassed us in innumerable ways. Thou hast now arrived; our acts of merit have borne fruit at last by Thy grace. Do Thou punish the evil-doer and bring us relief!"

To this heart-felt praise and earnest appeal, the Lord makes this reply : "Dear lady, listen! At the end of the epoch of Swayambhuva Manu, you were known as Prisni and Vasudeva as Sutapa. At the instance of Brahma, both of you did an arduous penance over a long stretch of twelve thousand years, keeping your senses under perfect control, exposing yourselves to the rigours of heat and cold, sustaining yourselves on a meagre diet of bare roots and leaves, and adoring Me with pure thoughts and single-minded devotion. You looked like two radiant disembodied souls. Then I appeared before you in my original form and gave you the choice to ask for boons of permanent value. But as your minds

were unable to pierce through the layer of attachment, you did not ask for redemption from samsara, for the coveted place in Paramapada. Instead, as you were languishing under the misery of childlessness, you desired me to bestow on you a son, equal to me in every respect. I conferred that boon on you; and as none can equal Me, I became your son with the name Prsnagarbha. Again, when you happened to be the couple, Kasyapa and Aditi, I took birth for the second time as Vamana, the younger brother of Devendra. Now, for the third and last time, I claim your parentage. By treating me as your beloved son (*Nandana*) and at the same time by thinking of me as Parabrahma, the Lord of supreme bliss, you will earn your liberation (*moksha*) and never be born again". Then the Lord explained to Vasudeva a stratagem by which Kamsa's monstrous design of putting an end to Him could be averted. Thereafter the Lord withdrew His magnificent form and looked an infant just born. At that very moment, Yoga-Maayat took birth as the child of Yasoda in Nandavraja.

Freed from fetters in a mysterious way, Vasudeva now bestirred himself to carry out the instructions of Hari. Hugging the baby to his bosom, he moved out with stealthy steps to the gate and found the watchmen lost in sound sleep. Strange, the huge locks opened and the chains severed, of their own accord, without making any noise and gave passage to Vasudeva; Sesha, the serpent-lord came behind, closing the doors. When they came out in the open, Sesha came closer, spread his hood, as a protecting shield to the Divine Child against heavy rain. As they reached the banks of the swelling Yamuna, the river suddenly subsided and made way for them — thus providing a facility similar to the one that the Sea offered to Rama while crossing to Lanka. Vasudeva hastened to Nanda's house with ease, reached Yasoda's bedstead, gently placed the little son by her side, lifted her tender daughter, and wended his steps homeward, reached the prison and deposited the female infant by Devaki's side. Once he was in, the gates of the prison closed automatically, the chains and the locks resumed their original position. Vasudeva soon found himself bound in chains; he lay coiled in a corner shaking with fear and grief,

Yasoda and all the inhabitants of Nandavraja were under a strong spell of Maaya and knew not what transpired during the night.

Spiritual aspirants may here reflect over the esoteric aspects of Krishna Jananam.

- (i) When Jeevaatma and Saattvika Buddhi come together, the Paramaatmatatva, which lies immanent, emerges as a glorious manifestation. It is strange that this happens at midnight, in a barred prison and in a frightening climate of roaring thunder and blinding lightning. The worldly-minded are unaware that, with their intellects overcast with clouds of ignorance, with their minds consumed by the thunder and lightning of fiery passions, with their hearts drenched in the downpour of stifling appetites, they are wallowing in a terrible plight. It is to save them from this peril that the Lord chooses to arrive on the worldly scene.
- (ii) But to the Devotees of the Lord, who find nights to be congenial to their spiritual exercises, the Lord appears in all His glory with a happy blend of human form and divine paraphernalia, of easy accessibility and impressive supremacy, of attractive amiability and perplexing power. At the very first sight of him, the devotee finds the knot of his egotism shattered and the fetters of his sins broken. As he surrenders at His feet and wears Him in His heart, the locks of the prison of Karma fall off and the doors turn back, yielding him a passage to the world of freedom. Absorbed in the contemplation of the Lord, he moves on with implicit trust in His guidance and wades with ease through the waters of *samsaara* (which sink to knee-deep level) and reaches his coveted destination.
- (iii) The journey from Mathura to Nandavraja has its own implication. Mathura is the place where the mind undergoes perpetual churning (*mathana*); various desires compete passionately for prior attention and fulfilment; and all this activity is for the sake of evanescent plea-

tures of the body that last only for a brief spell. And Kamsa or Kaama exercises tyrannical sway over it, making life a miserable turmoil. To escape this sad plight of worldly entanglements, the devotee proceeds to Vraja, the place of bliss, where Nanda, the repository of Ananda, exercises a benevolent rule. The soul's pilgrimage to Paramapada is thus indicated.

The little female infant in Devaki's bed-side piped its shriek. The watchmen woke up; examined the locks and found them in tact. They felt assured that nothing had gone wrong during their deep slumber. They hastened to convey the message of the new arrival to Kamsa. The news disturbed the King; he sprang from his bed, his locks of hair parted in a clumsy fashion and his upper garment hung loose over his shoulder; he lost patience; in fact, he strode furiously and rushed into the prison. He was about to pull the child from the bed, when Devaki intervened and put in a strong plea for mercy: "Dear brother, be pleased to show forbearance; this is no nephew but a niece and she poses no threat to you; killing of a woman, you know, contravenes the code of Kshatriya conduct; you have put to sword my six sons; if this child were a son, you may have a justification for your violence, on the ground that he might spell danger to your life. I am now denied the privilege of begetting a son. Won't you spare this little one and bestow on me this gift of a daughter? Am I not your sister? Pray, show mercy and earn lasting fame by treading the path taken by all our great ancestors." Devaki wailed piteously and hugged the little daughter close to her bosom, pressed her cheek against her own in fondness, and covered her with her upper garment; she hoped all the while that her words would melt her brother's heart. It was a vain hope that she entertained. Kamsa's ingrained cruelty would resist all attempts at mollification. He flew into rage, rated his sister outright for her remonstrance, forcibly snatched away the crying babe from the mother and dashed her against the pavement. Such was the ghastliness of his diabolical ferocity! But, strange to behold! The little babe did not strike the earth, but sprang into space with ease and assumed the dazzling form of a charming goddess.

She was decked in garlands of sweet-scented flowers and gold ornaments studded with diamonds; she was accoutred with weapons -- mace, bow, shield, noose (*paasa*), sword, spear, conch and disc -- in her eight hands. The denizens of the aerial regions (siddhas, charanas, kinneras, garudas, gandharvas, etc.) assembled and made their offerings to her and sang her praises. She admonished Kamsa: "O wicked one, you have cruelly put to death Devaki's little ones without any compunction. Not content with that murderous monstrosity, you have tried to blast me against the stony pavement. What a fine display of heroism! O villain, take note that a mighty hero who has taken birth alongside me and who will bring about your fall is thriving elsewhere in safety". The goddess disappeared after making this pronouncement.

The words of Yoga Maaya struck Kamsa's ears like sharp arrows; panic overtook him; his mind was very much shattered. Kamsa was seized by a sudden upsurge of penitence. He sought the pardon of Devaki and Vasudeva for all his cruel misdemeanours: "I am a wicked monster; I have killed your little ones in a merciless fashion, unmindful of my close kinship with you; pinning my faith to the pronouncement of the Invisible Voice, I have committed crimes against virtuous people like you. I beseech your pardon, please be merciful." Kamsa then turned philosophic and observed how the individuals and their actions and their mutual relations were regulated and directed by their own piles of Karma, meritorious or otherwise; and thus viewed, there was no killer and no slain. Only an ignorant man would feel that he had destroyed his enemies or was ruined by them; for, the truth was that the soul had no such affinity or hostility. Kamsa shed tears for his past misconduct; freed Vasudeva and Devaki from fetters, ordered his attendants to provide them with all comforts of the royal household. Vasudeva responded in an equal measure and confirmed Kamsa's view that only people who were bereft of true knowledge made a differentiation between themselves and others and pursued ways which widened the cleavage; and that they were, all the while, unmindful of the fact that the same Lord was immanent in all of them. Kamsa was pleased with

their readiness for reconciliation and took leave of them with cordial warmth. It is surprising that even in diabolical hearts of granite, there lie veins of noble impulses which sprout forth occasionally; But they soon languish and dry up for want of congenial climate and proper sustenance and nurture. Kamsa's inherent demoniac qualities, supported by his colleagues' provocations nipped the healthy, wholesome, natural instincts in the very bud; and turned him again to his usual ways of hostility and wickedness.

Let us reflect for a little while on the parentage and the timing of the Incarnation of Vishnu. Devaki and Vasudeva were eminently qualified to become the parents of Hari by their lives of purity, truthfulness and rectitude. They had been privileged to enjoy that honour twice before as Prisni and Sutapa and as Aditi and Kasyapa. That they were jnanis perfect in their understanding of God's nature as the Supreme Spirit (Transcendental and Immanent, All-pervasive and Eternal, the only One without a Second) and of His close kinship with the human soul, could be understood by their patient endurance of their sufferings as the consequences of past Karmas and by their faithful surrender to the All-powerful, God for succour and protection. And they had to wait for an unconscionable time for relief; but they never faltered in their faith and never gave up hope. Such piety and tenacity were amply rewarded in the end. Spiritual aspirants can draw wholesome lessons from their example in their endeavours and pursuits. And now about the timing of the manifestation. While the whole world was immersed in deep stupor, the Lord chose to take His birth in the midnight hour. The Light that came to chase away the gloom that invested the world shone all the brighter against the background of darkness. He took birth in prison, only to see that His devotees were released from the dark confines of *samsara* and freed from the shackles of ignorance. Even He, the Protector of the universe, had to devise a plan to protect Himself till the time became ripe for action against the sources of evil. Born as a child of Devaki at Mathura, the Lord had to change over to Nandavraja

overnight, there to be brought up as the son of Yasoda. Mathura, the capital of demoniac forces, would not present a proper arena for the innocent sports and merry pranks of the Divine Child as Nandavraja, the village of simple and innocent rural folk, would. This change was imperative for security reasons, of course. But should not Nanda and Yasoda be afforded the pleasure of playing the role of parents to Him? Nanda and Yasoda prayed to Hari in a previous birth that they should be vouchsafed the privilege of *nursing Him and bringing Him up* as their child. In this incarnation Hari fulfilled their wish. Simultaneously, He fulfilled His commitment to be *born* as the son, for the third time, of His devotees, who were then in prison at Mathura as Devaki and Vasudeva. Another point to note. What would be the night of rest for worldlings from their mundane pursuits would be the day of activity for yogis for their spiritual exercises and meditation. That was why the celestials in their large numbers with Brahma and Siva at their head and great sages and saints in their company could muster strong at midnight in the prison to glorify and welcome the Lord as He came into the world. By His advent, He freed the devotees from the fetters of worldly desires and illumined their minds with knowledge to chase away the gloom of ignorance. Even the natural elements roared welcome to Him in ecstatic joy. But the evil-minded remained somnolent and were unaware of the emergence of their destroyer. Such was their pride in their strength and power that they could never imagine any challenge to their security. Could it be that God would give them the longest rope so that they could hang themselves with it without the involvement of outside agencies? Or could it be that God would give, out of His grace, many more opportunities for them to mend themselves; and if by their obtuseness they refused to avail themselves of the chance, time and again, they would invite their own ruin? Mysterious are the ways of Providence !

As the night passed, the veil of deep slumber that was spread by Yoga Maaya on Nandavraja lifted; the village woke up to its usual active life. Nanda was overjoyed with the birth of a son. He invited Vedic scholars and arranged for

auspicious purificatory rites, made offerings to his manes and celebrated this joyous event in a grand manner. The Brahmins were pleased with his lavish gifts and blessed the new-born child with long life, immense affluence, and abiding fame as an invincible victor. The child's arrival was proclaimed by trumpets and drums; minstrels sang the praises of the family; groups of musicians joined in a chorus to express their joy. The houses and the courtyards were tastefully decorated with flags and festoons; and gentle zephyr wafted the sweet scents of burning musk, camphor and frankincense. Smeared with turmeric paste the cattle shone with golden hue; the calves indulged in merry gambols; the bulls bellowed with rare alacrity; the cows took delight in emptying their udders in jets of milk. Nanda celebrated the occasion by making generous gifts, unasked, to professional craftsmen and artisans in cash and kind. Dressed in their best holiday-attire, the Gopa elders and youth turned up with gifts to see the child; and charmed by his beauty, they could not contain their joy but expressed it in their merry pastime—indulgence in a liberal sprinkling of milk, water, butter and ghee upon one another and cracking pleasant jokes among themselves. The gopikas did not lag behind; the good tidings of Yasoda giving birth to a son spread by word of mouth over the entire village. The ladies bestirred themselves, condensed their toilet operations into a brief span of time, even as curiosity to see the child provided the incentive to hasten to Nanda's house. As they marched out in the streets to their destination, they presented a fascinating sight. With their lotus-faces glistening with beads of sweat, with their sparkling eyes shadowed by the ringlets of their curly forelocks, with their heavy posteriors slackening the pace of their gait, with their slender waists swaying nervously under the strain, with their prominent bosoms partially exposed by the breeze blowing aside their upper garments—the bevy of rustic belles added, by their hilarious company, to the gaiety of the occasion. They had a glimpse of Yasoda's son; and they fell immediately under his fascinating spell. They smeared his body with oil and turmeric, gave it a bath with warm water and dried it with soft linen and exposed it to the scented fumigations of myrrh and

frankincense. They laid the child in the cradle and blessed him with benedictory songs and lulled him to sleep.

The Lord, who delights in sinking the worlds in the Deluge and in shining above it, now finds pleasure in getting drenched in the scented waters sprayed on Him by the women; the Lord who knows no sleep, engaged in putting the worlds to sleep and keeping watch over them, now appears to slide into sleep and keeps his eyes closed under the influence of the soporific lullaby. One who knows no constraint submits to the limitations of a cowherd's habitation; One who is absolutely free and is above *karma* now undergoes the ceremonial rites connected with birth; One who has never tasted the milk of a mother now learns to suck milk from Yasoda's breasts; One who knows no change now shows signs of growth in the labour-room; One who is beyond the reach of all practisers of rigorous penance and spiritual exercises now becomes easily accessible to the simple, innocent inhabitants of Vrepalli; One who remains incomprehensible as Supreme Phenomenon to all scholars and sages now discloses Himself as the easily accessible child of Nanda, Krishna. When the child in the cradle moves his tender limbs, he looks like the creator Brahma; when he casts pleasing looks and smiles, he sparkles like Vishnu; when he gets annoyed and knits his brows he frightens like Rudra; but when he loses himself in blissful sleep, he appears to be Parabrahma Himself.

Nanda invited Rohini and honoured her with new silk robes and other presents. Rohini became closer to Nanda family, even as the child's charm was inescapably captivating. From the moment of Krishna's advent, the affluence of Nandavraja increased a thousandfold; the land flowed with milk and honey. Nanda left his domain in the care of strong, wise and capable Gopas during his absence at Mathura. It was time for him to pay the tribute due to Kamsa; it was a feudal obligation that he had peremptorily discharged, if only to avoid a clash with a mighty and a wicked neighbour. After paying court to Kamsa, Nanda, as was his wont, met his friend Vasudeva. Vasudeva was immensely pleased to see Nanda; he felt like one who, dead for a while, got revived; he wel-

comed him with a loving embrace; concern for his son, who now passed for Nanda's son, urged him to enquire about his welfare. But this was a secret known to him only. So he cautiously proceeded with his enquiry. He complimented Nanda on his begetting a son. He observed that after long years of anxious wait and deep distress, Nanda rejoiced that fortune smiled on him and gave him a sense of fulfilment. Such happiness as Nanda's would be remote from one who had no issue. Now that Vasudeva could claim a friend like Nanda, who had no reservations in his relations with him, he felt like one who was resuscitated from death. Vasudeva made another significant observation : "Could people who were subjected to various troubles and sufferings remain steady at one place ? Would not pieces of timber carried together by a river in spate part and move in different directions at some stage or other ? How could a householder, who was forbidden contact with his friends and whose children were put to sword, be expected to have peace and happiness ?" Vasudeva then made solicitous enquiries about the Gopas and their well-being. He hoped that the herds of cattle were free from diseases, that the cows yielded milk in plenty, that the rivers and ponds were replete with water, that the woods were full of green luscious fodder, that the grazing grounds were free from wild beasts of prey. Then he completed the enquiry with the topic dearest to his heart ; "Nanda, how about my child whom you and your wife fondle with abundant affection and who looks up to you as his father ? Is he hale and cheerful ?" Nanda makes a wonderfully soothing reply : "Friend, Kamsa cruelly put to the sword your sons; he tried to destroy your daughter but she gave him the slip and rose into the sky. These happenings were ordained by Providence; and no wise person should grovel in grief for them. Be comforted. Is not my son your own son ?" Vasudeva drew solace from Nanda's words. He expressed his happiness that Nanda could, after paying his tribute to Kamsa, find time to meet him; and that their meeting resulted in mutual satisfaction. He warned Nanda to hasten home as he saw some portents foreboding evil to Nandavraja.



III (ii) THE CHILD'S MIRACULOUS EXPLOITS

III (ii) - 13 P U T A N A

Yoga Maaya's castigation of Kamsa's heartless massacre of Devaki's sons and her threat that his days were numbered, as his destroyer was growing elsewhere in safety, shocked Kamsa into a realisation of his enormous guilt and expression of repentance for his misdeeds. This spurt of good feeling lasted only for a night. The next morning, he convened a meeting of his ministers and friends and acquainted them with the pronouncement of Yoga Maaya. Their reaction was prompt. They advised immediate extermination of all infants and children in cities and villages so as to eliminate the menace to his life. Any delay would spell danger. They suggested that investigations should be made about the hide-outs of the celestial enemies whom Kamsa routed in war. It would be imprudent to allow them time to recoup and muster their forces again; they should be traced and destroyed mercilessly. It was well-known that Hari would reside in Vedas, in the practisers of eternal virtues like faith, truth, mercy, patience, perseverance, peace and in Brahmins and cows. They observed that Hari would come to an end if they destroyed celestials, Brahmins reciting Vedas, cows and calves, anchorites engaged in penance, and people cultivating virtues and treading along the path of righteousness. Their proposal tasted sweet as it was in tune with his demoniac nature; and the little ember of goodness, that shot up in a blaze, soon got completely extinguished. Kamsa was back on the road of wickedness.

Kamsa let loose the forces of evil on the world. They harassed the gentle and virtuous folks and earned great discredit and a substantial pile of sins; and thus lost, in this process, vigour and strength, affluence and longevity to a large extent. Putana, the terrible demoness, was a hated infant-killer. She was commissioned by Kamsa to eliminate all infants, wherever found; and she carried out the master's command during her rambles through cities and villages. The

Supreme Lord, hearing whose name would expel all fears from the mind, was in the cradle, as child Krishna in Yasoda's mansion. Putana, gliding unseen through air on a search for infants, stopped short at Nanda's, on hearing the shrill piping of a child. She felt happy that she could get a victim. She did not know that the child announced himself to invite her to her doom. She transformed herself into a handsome woman. With a radiant face, mellow eyes, prominent bosom, slender waist, heavy posteriors, delicate limbs and bright locks of hair, Putana presented an enchanting form. Her gold ear-studs played on her marble cheeks; the jasmynes decking her hair attracted bees by their sweet scent; her ornaments, necklaces, armlets, wristlets and anklets, brightened her features; and as she moved into the house, her upper garment swayed in the breeze. The gopikas admired her beauty and felt as though Lakshmi herself condescended to go amidst them to bless them. Such was the visitor's fascination that they were struck dumb and looked on with wonder as the damsel neared the cradle. The little child, being no other than the Lord of all creatures, moving or stationary, could at once divine that this fair damsel was no other than the ghastly demoness who revelled in infanticide; and that she had come on purpose to kill him by suckling him with her poisoned breasts. He smiled within himself and thought that the time had come so soon to initiate his mission of redemption of the world from evil forces. He lay still, closed his eyes and began to snore like one in deep slumber. The cruel beauty came close to the cradle, softly lifted the child, drew him close to her breasts, gently kissed him and said in a low tone : "Dear child, there is none who can suckle you and leave the place making sure of your departure (from the world); how I wish to suckle you, stand by you and leave the place at my leisure ! Just have a mouthful of my breast-milk, dear ! We shall then see how beautiful you look ! It is then that I shall reap the fruit of my beauty as well." Yasoda and Rohini vehemently protested, told the woman that the child would not have any one else's milk and ordered her to keep aloof. They took back the sleeping child and placed him in the cradle. But the woman ignored their command, put on innocent looks, spoke soft words and under their facade, concealed her real

murderous intention. She was like the sharp blade concealed in the sheath. She was playing a fraudulent trick, on the ladies assembled there, with success. But she was not aware that the sleeping child was playing a more deceitful trick on her, that he was a more venomous serpent pretending sleep. Putana coaxed the child, placed him in her lap, gently slid her hand on his back, kissed his head and applying his mouth to her nipple induced him to suck the milk. It was now for the child to play his game. He slowly opened his eyes, cast a glance at her face, straightened his limbs with a drawling yawn, raised his little hands, turned towards her, played with her hard breasts for a while, and taking a firm grip sucked milk a mouthful, a second mouthful.....and that was all. Putana trembled all over, her head sank; her heart seemed to split; she pleaded hard with the child to stop sucking and release her breast from his grip and wailed that he was not like other children. Yes, so it was; he was different; and he seemed to feel that once he entered upon a sport, he should not leave it half way but go through it to the very end. Though the milk was poisoned, Krishna relished it as nectar; so he continued sucking to his heart's content, despite Putana's persistent remonstrance; he felt satiated only when he sucked out her vital airs and life. Putana's assumed form disappeared. What crashed to the earth, lifeless, was the ghastly demoness with a ghoulish shriek. There lay the huge carcass, stretching over a yojana and half. With hard, long projecting canines, with nose like the mouth of a mountain cave, with breasts resembling hillocks of granite, with a huge pile of grisly unkempt copper hair, with eyes like deep dark wells, with posteriors like massive sand-dunes, with arms, thighs and legs enormous in dimensions like tree trunks, with a belly like a vast dried-up lake — Putana's giantly frame terrified the cowherds and their womenfolk. Her terrible fall shook the earth, sent a shiver among the planets and stars, frightened the quarters (*dikkulu*) with reverberations, and shook the worlds with fear. But the little child was not ruffled a bit; he was moving his limbs with a smile on his lips as he lay flat on the bosom of the dead Rakshasi. Here was one who had for his friend Siva, who adorned his throat with a phial of Halahala poison; here

was one who had for his mount Garuda, the enemy of poisonous serpents, here was one who had for his bed the lord of the serpents, Adisesha. To such a Supreme Person, how could poison smeared on Putana's breasts, ever prove dangerous? Would it not turn into nectar for Him?

Still, the inhabitants of Nandavraja observed certain traditional rites to exorcise the evil spirits from the child. He was lifted from the corpse, held close on the shoulder; he was patted gently on the back and head; his limbs were smeared with cow-dust and cow-dung and sprinkled over with the urine of cow; and he was wafted over with cow-tail — Not content with this traditional observance of purification, the gopikas performed more elaborate rites to ensure the safety of the dear child. They recited certain charms and invoked the help of various gods and goddesses for the protection of the child: "May Aja protect your feet, Animaya your heels, Yajna your thighs, Achyuta your waist, Hayasya your belly, Kesava your heart, Isa your chest, Ina your throat, Chaturbhuja your shoulders, Urukrama your face, Iswara your head! May Chakri guard the front, Gadadhara the rear, Dhanurdhara and Asidhara the sides, Urugaya (armed with conch and discus) the corners! May Upendra keep vigil above, Tarkshya below and Halamdhara all around! May Hrishikesa take charge of the Indriyas (senses), Narayana the *Pranas* (vital airs), Svetadwipapati the *Chitta* (discretionary power), Yogeswara the *Manas* (the mind), Prsnagarbha the *Buddhi* (the intellect), Bhagavan the *Ahamkara* (egoism)! May Govinda attend upon you when you play, Madhava when you sleep, Vaikuntha when you move about, Sripati when you sit and relax, Agni when you eat! May the mere mention of your name chase and destroy all the devils, ghouls, demons, ghosts, evil spirits! May, through your goodwill, people enjoy freedom from all diseases of the body and aberrations of the mind; may they be saved from convulsions of nature!" After pronouncing this elaborate benediction, the gopikas left, assured in their minds of the child's safety. Yasoda suckled the child and fondled him to sleep.

Nanda and his friends returned from Mathura; and found to their consternation the huge corpse of Putana at their thres-

hold. They admired Vasudeva as a Yogi who had a prophetic vision; he told them that their place was threatened with portents and monstrous occurrences. They cut Putana's body into convenient pieces, and carried them for a long distance away from the village and cremated them. There emerged from the burning body a fragrant smell; evidently, the touch of the Divine Child and his eager suckling of her breast sanctified the demoness. All her sins were washed out; she gained the status of a mother as she fed the child with her breast-milk and gained access to heaven. Here was a cruel demoness, reveling in infanticide, and coming on purpose to destroy Krishna by treating him to poisoned milk, who was punished with death for her cruel intention but rewarded with heaven for her conduct as a solicitous mother eager to suckle the child. Such death as Putana's was no punishment, as it was a precursor to her translation into the land of bliss. Such then is the measure of the Lord's graciousness that He ignores the bushel of sin and gives credit for a grain of merit ! And how unimaginable and magnanimous the reward, out of all proportion to the speck of what *He* deems good in the recipient !

The work of redemption of the world from evil began with the elimination of the demoness Putana in this Incarnation of Krishna. Sri Rama's similar mission began, interestingly, in a like manner with the liquidation of another demoness, Tataka. Could there be any significance in this parallelism ? So pliable must have been feminine nature that it probably lent itself to be moulded into personalities of exalted stature, exemplars of strength, virtue and righteousness, like the Pativratas of old; or, at the other extreme, it made itself liable to be debased into loathesome creatures, examples of crookedness, stubbornness, vice and wickedness, like the Rakshasis of the past. For one who came on purpose to reform and regenerate, the work of cleansing and purifying would naturally claim priority. If a woman who should be a lovable angel turned into a stubborn Rakshasi, the process of cleansing should start from her, as the corruption of the best should be deemed to be the worst. Hence the elimination of a Tataka and a Putana. No special efforts need be made for the protection of the good and the

virtuous; for they would naturally thrive when the impediments of evil were removed. Some scholars would interpret Tataka and Putana as representatives of Avidya. The two demonesses were highly self-conceited and aggressive. Tataka believed that there was none superior to her in strength and that she could easily pounce on Rama and kill him; but her pride brought about her ruin: Rama released but one arrow from his bow; it struck her bosom; instantaneously she fell down to the earth, dead. Similarly Putana, an adept infant-killer, thought that she could liquidate Krishna with perfect ease by suckling him with her poisoned breast; but the child was no ordinary child; he sucked a mouthful of milk, and a second mouthful; and the giant crashed dead, stretching her hideous body on the pavement. Self-conceit and aggressiveness (*Avidya*) would invite ruin upon themselves when they dare challenge the existence of the Supreme Power.

The Putana episode reveals, on closer investigation, some interesting lessons of a wholesome character to spiritual aspirants: (a) Putana *assumes* the form of a handsome lady, *pretends* maternal love for the child, cajoles and fondles him to apply his mouth to her nipple and suck her milk; her conduct is thus worthy of a loving, solicitous mother. But her *intention* is to kill him with her poisoned breast-milk. But Krishna accepts her offer and drinks the milk with great relish; for, poison and nectar are equally agreeable to the Supreme Creator that Krishna really is. In attempting to kill the very embodiment of Immortality, the demoness becomes purified of her sins and attains immortality herself; for, what matters to Krishna is *not* her hideous *motive* but her laudable *show* of a mother's love. In this context, it is relevant to recall to mind the declaration made by Rama when doubts are expressed about Vibhishana's sincerity in seeking asylum with his brother Ravana's enemy. Rama is not prepared to refuse protection to Vibhishana, even if he is only *pretending* friendship outwardly without a genuine feeling of loyalty. *Mitrabhavena sampraptam na tyajeyam Kathamchana*. (b) The Lord's graciousness apart, there is another way of interpreting this episode. Putana is Prakriti. She *looks* like a mother; but she is *not* the

real mother. Prakriti provides us with objects of enjoyment (*bhogya vastus*), with agencies to secure them (*bhogopakaranas*) and with the places suitable for their indulgence (*bhogasthanas*). Her breasts are egoism (*ahamkara*) and possessiveness (*mamakara*); through them she feeds people with the poison (*visha*) of sense-pleasures (*vishayabhogas*); and thus attempts to kill them and not to sustain them. While poison (*visha*) kills the man who but *drinks* it, sense-objects (*vishayas*) destroy those who but *think* of them. It is therefore meet that this poison of taste for sense-pleasures is offered to Krishna; he will readily drink it and destroy Prakriti and bring redemption from it to the aspirants of spiritual life. The real mother is Yasoda; she represents (*Mantra*) incantation; close association with God and entire dependence on Him are her breasts; with them she suckles the aspirants and sustains their souls and brings them to the foot-stool of the Lord.



III - (ii) - 14. SAKATASURA

News of Putana's discomfiture and death struck Kamsa and his associates with astonishment. But being stubborn by nature, they would continue to employ other demons to kill Nanda's child whom they feared most. Sakatasura arrived in the hope that he would succeed where Putana failed. The day he came to Nandavraja, he saw that Yasoda and the gopikas were engaged in celebrating an occasion connected with a stage in the child's growth. The child, who was hitherto lying flat on his back, now could take a turn and reach a reverse position; he could rest on his belly and raise his head. Village folk were in the habit of solemnising even such small changes in the child's growth with festivities. The child was given a purificatory bath; scholars recited Vedic benedictions; musicians played on their instruments; the gopikas participated in

feast; Yasoda was occupied with receiving the guests. A child was put to sleep in the cradle beside the cart on which were stacked the sweets and savouries. A demon lurked near the child and 'possessed' the cart waiting for a suitable opportunity to crush the child under the weight of the cart. The sleeping child noticed the villain's sly approach and understood his plot. He awoke, set up a wail to indicate how hungry he was, and moved his soft limbs in his annoyance. His tender foot (with the beautiful marks of conch, discus, bow etc.,) happened to touch the cart; it was no more; yet, on mere contact, the cart went up with all its heavy load and crashed to the earth, with the axle, the wheels and all the other parts broken into smithereens and the eatables scattered all over in dust.

Nanda, Yasoda and all the assembled guests heard a deafening sound and rushed to the spot, with palpitating hearts, apprehending the infant's safety. They found him lying in the cradle, sound like a nut; only, his wailing continued. They wondered how this could have happened: a cart could not have risen of its own accord; the baby was not so strong as to kick it up in the air; it was a puzzle difficult to understand. The children who were playing nearby explained to them that it was the wailing hungry baby's foot that sent the cart flying into air when it came into contact with it. The explanation seemed to be an incredible fantasy: how could a tender infant kick a heavy cart and make it fly into air? Who would believe this story? They dismissed it as a figment of imagination. But they could not account for this miraculous happening. Yasoda hastened to the babe's side, clasped him to her bosom, cajoled him from crying and coaxed him to calm down, and fed him with her breast-milk. The gopa elders arranged for the performance of several propitiatory rites with a view to exorcising the evil spirits from the neighbourhood. Nanda honoured Vedic scholars and invoked their blessings upon the child.

Some scholars suggest that this episode of the elimination of Sakatasura imparts a lesson to spiritual aspirants,

Putana's death signifies the destruction of Avidya; the Supreme alone could achieve that miracle. Putana has thought that Krishna is naught; and Krishna has proved her to be naught. Sakata is a means of transport; it enables things to move from place to place. Sakata represents the body (*sarira*) which is the award of past Karma. Its two wheels, which are good deeds and bad, move on, causing joys and sorrows, and pile up merits (*punnyam*) and sins (*papam*) for the future. So long as the body exists, it has to move on, collecting experiences; and it cannot be wished away. Thus, it is Karma (*works*) that carries individual selves (*jivatmas*) from birth to next birth; and it should be dispensed with if release (*moksha*) is to be attained. But how to do it? Be it noted that only actions done with desire and with expectation of reward become *Karma* and bind the self. But actions which are selfless in origin, and which contribute to general good on completion, and which are consecrated to God, become *Yoga*: they do not bind the doer. It is again God's grace that burns up the piled-up Karma (*sanchitakarma*) and fling away the future Karma (*aagami karma*) and gives redemption from *samsara*. It is only when the wheels of Karma of both kinds receive the impact of the Lord's foot that the cart of the body collapses and moves not. To smash the cart to smithereens is to free the aspirant from all hidden desires (*vaanchas*), residual tastes (*rucheesh*) and latent tendencies (*vaasanas*) and to raise him to the status of a Yogi, a savant, a saint.



III - (ii) - 15. TRINAVARTA

Failures are stepping-stones to success. Yes; when the attempts are made to gain laudable ends. But, failures become descending-stairs leading to ruin, when the machinations aim at achieving disastrous results. Putana and Sakatasura fail in their wicked mission of putting an end to Nanda's little child: they crash to the earth in miserable death. Swollen-headed villains refuse to learn from experience; they perpetrate more ferocious designs to achieve their objectives. At the instance of Kamsa, Trinavarta now enters the arena with a hauteur that sneers at the incompetence of his predecessors in carrying out the master's wish. He believed that where craftiness and massiveness have failed, violent force will succeed. He is the whirlwind. Who can resist his impetuous velocity and force?

One evening, Yasoda was seen fondling her child who was seated on her lap. A few moments later, the child suddenly began to turn heavier and heavier; and unable to bear the weight, Yasoda put him down, wondering whether he could be the One who took birth to save the world. Scarcely had a minute passed, when a virulent gale suddenly blew (from nowhere as it were), turned into a whirlwind at the spot; blinded the people gathered there with the voluminous dust that it raised; and lifted and carried off the child to the upper regions. This was Trinavarta in action. The dust raised by him covered all the quarters (*dikkulu*) and spread darkness over the sky, even eclipsed the rays of the sun for a time. Consternation seized the gopas and gopikas; they could not locate one another; confusion reigned supreme; they were struck with panic. The child was missing: Yasoda was severely shaken; she broke down into a heart-rending wail: "O, my dear son, my precious jewel, whither are you gone? I have just laid you down, even here, just a moment ago; and you have been frisking about merrily! Wherefrom has this wretched whirlwind come and whither has it snatched you away? How cruel is Providence? How can I live without

you, my darling ?” The travail was much too much to bear, and Yasoda fainted. The gopikas, who were deeply disturbed by the child’s disappearance, felt absolutely miserable on seeing Yasoda’s distress.

Trinavarta who, in his impetuous arrogance, considered the child to be no weightier than a blade of grass and lifted him in a single swoop and carried him off to upper regions, began whimpering when he found his burden becoming heavier and heavier. He now knew how this child was no ordinary one; he was snorting, breathing hard, and was in fact on the point of collapse; he knew not how to dispose of his burden. He little knew that he caught a Tartar. It was now the child’s turn to bring his captor to book. He held the demon tight by folding his hands around his neck, and dragged him down with his mountainous weight. The demon could not release himself from the child’s iron grip; he trembled like a bird caught in the net of a hunter. During the descent, the demon suffered suffocation and became almost a breathless lump when the child released him. Virulence is self-exhausting; aggressive wickedness ends in precipitate ruin, when confronted with a mightier opponent. Trinavarta fell on the rocks and his limbs were smashed. The gopas breathed a sigh of relief. As they neared the dead rakshasa, they found the child cheerfully playing on his chest, as though nothing had happened. The gopas picked up the child, who now resumed his normal weight, and carried him to Yasoda. This extraordinary display of the child’s miraculous power filled all of them with dismay. They wondered how they deserved to have the blessing of Krishna’s presence amongst them. They must have acquired great merit in the previous births by noble undertakings, such as the performance of sacrifices and religious rites, the bestowal of large-scale gifts and charities, the launching of pilgrimages to sacred places, the pursuit of truthful and righteous lives etc.... Otherwise, they thought they could not have become witnesses to these wonderful miraculous deeds of the child, Krishna. What appear as mysterious and miraculous deeds for the mortals are to the Omnipotent mere playful pranks and sportive diversions.

Trinavarta is Trishna, inordinate ambition, soaring at its zenith. He has an intense desire to win the cosiest position in his master's heart by scoring an outstanding victory in one swoop, in a venture that has proved fatal to his predecessors, Putana and Sakatasura, and thus remove a constantly irritating thorn in Kamsa's side. Vaulting ambition recognises no impediments in its course; it is confident of achieving miracles by leaps and bounds; it claims a monopoly of all worldly pleasures; with impatience and impudence as its inseparable lieutenants, it recks not the pros and cons of its designs; it hurls itself into impossible adventures, taking them to be light and within its easy reach. The results of such impetuous escapades are utter dismay and frustration, nay, ignominious disaster and ruin. Spiritual aspirants are cautioned to steer clear of the snares and temptations of worldly ambition, as any lapse on their part is certain to lead them to a swift unforeseen and precipitous doom. Trinavarta's case signals this warning.



III - (iii) NOTABLE INCIDENTS IN NANDAVRAJA

III - (iii) 16 (i) Christening of Rama and Krishna :

At the request of Vasudeva, Garg, the Preceptor of Yadavas, arrived at Nandavraja. Nanda was agreeably surprised that the great sage, a conqueror of the internal enemies (of desire, anger, greed and attachment, arrogance and jealousy), a terror to the evil-minded and the wicked and an exemplar of uprightness and virtuous conduct, should have condescended to visit his place. He received him in all humility and offered him the hospitality due to revered guests. Nanda observed that it was his great good fortune that a sage of eminence was pleased to visit him; and he was sure that such a visit was

meant to confer abiding good on him. After paying a tribute of praise for the sage's spiritual wisdom and astrological scholarship, Nanda entreated Garg to christen the little children of Rohini and Yasoda. Custom invested the preceptor with the prerogative of naming the children; and people deemed it auspicious if he was pleased to exercise it. Garg then revealed to Nanda the pronouncement made by Yoga Maaya when she escaped from Kamsa's murderous attempt. He explained that as Kamsa's suspicions would be centred on Nanda's child as Devaki's son, it would be prudent to keep the christening ceremony a secret. Nanda fell in with his suggestion. Garg then drew Rohini's son closer to him and named him *Raama*, as he had a charm about him which would attract people and make them happy; and *Bala* as he had great strength which would strike people with awe; and *Sankarshana* as he was aborted from Devaki's womb and inserted in Rohini's when he was still a foetus. Then Garg fixed his gaze on Yasoda's child and declared: "This child who had skin of white, red, yellow tints in previous epochs, now turned black and so would be known as *Krishna*. As he was born as Vasudeva's son, he would be called *Vasudeva*. As this child had innumerable forms and attributes, he would be known by countless names. This child would avert dangers and would punish the wicked. He would equal the Supreme Person, Narayana Himself". Garg revealed the antecedents of the two children, Rohini's and Yasoda's; and Nanda could now understand clearly how Krishna could do those miracles in his infancy.

III - (iii) - 16 (2) Their divinity exposed :

Balarama and Krishna presented a fascinating sight when they indulged in childish pranks : they amused people with their little halting words, as they tried to speak out their minds; they entertained people, when they caught hold of the tails of calves and tugged at them. When they lay on the ground and lifted their heads, they looked like serpents with raised hoods; when they rolled on the earth and got covered with dust, they appeared like little elephants; when they frisked about with vigour, they had the fierce looks of lion-

cubs; when they were fondled by womenfolk they shone like the morning sun and the full moon; when they had their feed at their mothers' breasts, they slid into a trance and resembled Yogis enjoying peace in their spiritual communion. The children sometimes created the impression that they were not different from Lord Siva : the dirt which covered their bodies looked like layers of sacred ashes; the pearl that shone on the crown looked like the crescent; the red mark in the centre of the forehead blazed like the eye that consumed Cupid; the sapphire in the necklace sparkled like the dark spot on Siva's throat; the garlands adorning their chests resembled the serpents decorating Siva's bosom. Gopa children of the same age loved and admired Rama and Krishna and moved in close friendship with them and respected them as their leaders. As they grew, Krishna became the cynosure of all eyes. He took the lead in creating fun by his mischievous frolics and entertaining talk.

III - (iii) - 16 (3) Fun and frolic :

When Yasoda cautioned him not to make noise, Krishna appeared offended and withdrew from her; but the eager mother could not withstand separation, and extended her hand of welcome to her darling with a feast of smiles; and Krishna returned with a beaming face but on his own terms, making noise, which was forbidden, with the jingling bells of his waist-band. Yasoda made no protest, but fondly drew him close to her bosom and suckled him. Krishna played with his friends, calling them cows and bellowed at them as a stud-bull; sometimes, he assumed rulership and issued commands to them in an authoritative manner. On occasions, he played the role of a robber-chief and told his friends to steal things from their homes, after the inmates went to sleep, and hide themselves with their booty. He showed his skill in various sports, in hide-and-seek, in throwing the hand-ball, in swinging over long stretches.

But there were several occasions when juvenile enthusiasm carried Krishna beyond the limits of propriety in his

frölics, particularly with the womenfolk. Numerous gopikas approached Yasoda making serious allegations against her beloved child, and how he was harassing them in ever so many ways. One lady complained that when young mothers expressed their misery that their children were not having enough milk, Krishna laughed loudly and set free the calves to enjoy their feeds at the udders of the cows. Another woman protested that Krishna removed the pots of hot milk from her house, distributed the contents among young mothers, and broke the pots without any consideration for her. A third was angry that Krishna mounted a wooden mortar and thus managed to reach the milk-pot suspended in a sling; and making a big hole at the bottom drank all the milk and cream; and not content with that, palmed off the mischief on to the daughter-in-law by smearing her mouth with cream and made her the victim of her mother-in-law's wrath. A fourth gopika brought to Yasoda's notice how Krishna drank off the ghee stored in a household and transported the empty pots to the neighbour's; and he enjoyed the fun when the affected parties bandied harsh words and exchanged blows in a scuffle. A devout lady voiced a pathetic complaint that Krishna heckled her and desecrated the walls of the domestic shrine (*Poojamandir*) with butter drawn from his mouth; and that when she protested, he declared that there was no God other than he. Several complaints were forthcoming about the little child's indecent behaviour: one lady moaned that when her daughter caught him red-handed while he was stealing the butter, he hugged her and then made good his escape; another woman complained that when she apprehended him at the threshold, he kissed her on the lips and bolted away. Instances of more aggressive outrage were recounted by other gopikas: Krishna disregarded the privacy of a young woman who was taking her bath and whisked away her garment; he made a proposal to another beauty that if she agreed he would elope with her; when a lady felt miserable for not having sons, Krishna wooed her to marry him, assuring her that she would beget thereby a plethora of male children. Seeing the men-folk leave their houses for their work, Krishna entered and

invited the women to make merry sport with him; he went on pressing lumps of butter into a girl's throat till she felt suffocated; he threw a snake on a sleeping couple in bed and made them flee into streets in panic. The gopika women expressed their bitterness and annoyance and questioned Yasoda whether her wealth and position endowed her son with license to indulge in such questionable behaviour. These mischievous pranks of a suckling child could be deemed as amusing and should not be taken as having any serious repercussions. The gopikas were not really offended, though they made such vociferous complaints to Yasoda. They also expressed wonder as to how this little child could manage to be present simultaneously at various places: how, while locks were all intact, Krishna could enter the cellars, outwitting the alert women on the watch, and empty the pots of milk and butter; how he could sing in one house, dance in another, play in a third house, laugh in a fourth, crack jokes in a fifth, and indulge in banter in a sixth, and make himself scarce altogether in a trice — such ubiquity of presence and such wayward playfulness were unique and inexplicable. The women gave an ultimatum that, if the child's vagaries were not checked, they would be forced to quit the place and find a settlement elsewhere.

III - (iii) - 16 (4) Yasoda's defence :

Yasoda was taken aback when her darling was accused of such vile misdemeanours. She rebutted their charges, saying that the child was still a suckling and was always with her; that he never strayed away from the house; that he hardly knew the ways which led to the houses of neighbours; that he would play by himself only, and never asked for company. She remonstrated that it was highly improper that they should harass her innocent darling, an unweaned child, with such preposterous accusations. Yasoda was right; to the best of her knowledge and belief, her child was innocent. The gopa women too were right; they were witnesses to the scenes where Krishna played his mischievous pranks. Though they made the complaints against the child, they were soon pacified

even because they felt inwardly elated by his indefinable charm. Krishna kept mum; he looked perplexed when they recounted his aberrations; he maintained the poise and patience of a seasoned devotee; his face beamed with innocence and peace, as he rested his head against his mother's bosom. On seeing the little Krishna, the gopikas felt miserable for their hastiness in preferring complaints against him. They must have recalled in a flash that they were celestials and sages, who took birth on earth purposely to enjoy the company of the Lord in His incarnation as Krishna; and, consequently, they should be grateful for all his sportive pranks and amusing frolics and consider them as gracious favours conferred on them.

Let us reflect over the complaint that Krishna is the thief of fresh butter (*navoneeto chora*). The minds of the gopikas are engrossed in thoughts of Krishna. His charming features, his loving looks, his mischievous pranks of fun and frolic, alongside his mysterious exploits and miraculous deeds, undergo constant churning in their inmost hearts and throw up the butter of their fond love for him to the surface. Their *intention* is to offer it to him. But diffidence keeps them back. They are afraid that Krishna may reject it, considering that it is not sufficiently pure, or delicious or adequate. But Krishna, who *knows* their longing, gives credit for it and has no patience to wait till it is offered formally to him. He takes the earliest opportunity of snatching away and enjoying the lumps of fresh butter of love floating on their hearts. By such timely action, he not only saves their love from getting stale and insipid, but also initiates an unending process by which they can replenish the vacuum in their hearts with fresh supplies of floating love-cream. How can Krishna's action be damned as thieving, when what he carries off is what is *meant* for his use, on the sole ground that it is not actually *offered* to him? It is the Lord's graciousness that gives weight and value to longings and desires, even before they ever get transformed into actions. And the gopikas, on reflection, regret their complaint about Krishna's theft of their butter; and they feel grateful that by his considerate frolic he has saved them from the mental turmoil of hesitancy and fear in making an offer of their love to him.

- (iii) - 16 (5) Krishna's cosmic manifestation :

There were several instances when the child Krishna revealed his divine incarnation (eg. elimination of Putana, Sakata-
 'a, Trinavarta etc.). To Yasoda alone, he had disclosed
 himself as the Supreme on an earlier occasion : Yasoda seated
 the child on her lap, kissed him, stroked his hair and suckled
 him. Then the child yawned as he was getting drowsy. As he
 opened his mouth, Yasoda found in it the whole universe mani-
 fested — all the worlds, rivers, mountains, forests, fire, winds,
 oceans, the firmament, the sun and the moon and all planetary
 bodies, all living creatures etc. She closed her eyes in utter
 amazement. But such wonderful experiences were soon for-
 gotten; and the illusion that Krishna was an ordinary human
 child needing all care and protection clouded the mother's
 mind. One day, Balarama and other comrades complained to
 Yasoda that Krishna had eaten a lump of earth. Yasoda took
 Krishna to task and severely questioned him as to why he had
 resort to it, as if there was nothing more palatable to satisfy
 his hunger. To the simple, innocent, solicitous mother's
 anxious query came the clever, shrewd, convincing, reassuring
 report from the son : "Dear Mother, I am I an infant, am I ill-fed,
 am I mad, to have taken recourse to eating a lump of earth ?
 They concoct such false stories to provoke you so that you
 may punish me. You can yourself verify the truth or otherwise
 of their allegation by smelling my mouth. You may punish me
 if what they say is true." Krishna opened his mouth; Yasoda
 once again saw within it the whole universe revealed in all its
 splendour. She was perplexed beyond measure : "Here is a
 plaything of a child; and how is it that within his tiny mouth is
 embedded the whole creation ? Could it be true ? Or is it a
 mere dream ? Or may it be the illusion raised by Lord Vishnu ?
 Or am I not Yasoda and is not this place Nandavraja ? I am
 blown out of my wits. I am unable to make out why my
 plaything's mouth should contain such a magnificent phenome-
 non. No, this is no child. It must be Lord Vishnu in whom
 the universe is embedded who has chosen to manifest Himself
 as this child, I have seen myself, my husband, all the residents
 of Nandavraja, all our herds of cattle — in the Vision. Beatific

that He has been graciously pleased to favour me with. There is no doubt about the child being Vishnu. He is the all-pervasive Sustainer and Saviour; and I shall cling to Him praying for relief and redemption. He is our Lord," Krishna read her thoughts; he would have Yasode treat him as her child and not as God. So he cast a spell of illusion on her; and succumbing to it, she relapsed into her mood of a solicitous mother and drew the child to her bosom to suckle him. Nanda and Yasoda were fortunate in having the Lord for their son. Brahma desired that Drona, a prominent Vasuvu, and Dhara, his wife, should take birth on the earth; and they acceded to his wish on condition that they should be given the privilege of serving Lord Vishnu during their sojourn on earth. Brahma gave them the boon they asked for. Drona and Dhara took birth on earth respectively as Nanda and Yasoda; Lord Vishnu honoured Brahma's committal and derived pleasure by treating them as His parents and conducting Himself with filial love and devotion towards them.

Krishna shows the Vision Beatific to Yasoda alone; and why? She seems to rate him as a normal human child; she believes that some benevolent Providence has saved him from the wicked monsters, Putana, Sakatasura and Trinavarta. She knows not that the child alone has wrought their ruin. She takes him to task for all the allegations and complaints made by the gopikas, not being aware that they originate from the funny frolics of the Divine Incarnation. So Krishna gives her a glimpse of his real nature, to make her realise that her dear child is no other than the Supreme Person Himself. Yasoda now understands the truth about him and even resolves to pray to him for redemption. But, very soon, she relapses, under the spell of illusion, into a loving, solicitous mother. Nanda, on the other hand, is fully aware that the child is the incarnation of Vishnu; he is convinced of the child's divinity by the miraculous deeds he has witnessed and by the testimony offered by Sage Garg. So he needs no fresh proof in this regard.

It is not out of place here to refer to the illuminating assessment of the three Cosmic Manifestations of Krishna in

the Mahabharata as projected by Dr. V. Rama Krishna Rao in his collection of studies, under the title, *Altar-Stairs*.

In the Mahabharata, the Cosmic Vision is severally figured forth to Duryodhana, Arjuna and Udanka. The venue takes us successively to the Audience-Hall of Kaurava Court, to the Battlefield of Kurukshetra and to the Sage's Asramam near Dwaraka. When the Quartet of evil geniuses (*dashta chathushthayam*) fling to the winds the ethical code, and even the proprieties of hospitality, and plot the capture and castigation of the Ambassador of Peace, Krishna projects, *suo mato*, his terrific cosmic manifestation (*bhayaanaam bhayam, bheeshanam bheeshonanaam*) to warn those who lightly think of him to thwart their outrageous revolt and bring them to their senses. Maybe the malefactor interprets it to himself, in the density of his constitutional *tamaguna*, as one more instance of magic might (*moaya*) in Krishna, the Charlatan of infinite strategies! But the noble-natured ones acclaim it, even as a fresh witness to the eternal glory (*mahima*) of Bhagavan, the God-in-man here below. The impact of the awful vision is the certainty, in the long run, of a crushing discomfiture of vice and wickedness in villainy. The second manifestation comes in response to Arjuna's request, when he is swayed by demoralising doubt and distrust in his power to discharge his duty, ordained by the Code of Dharma, when faced with enemies among whom are people to whom he is bound with reverential and tender attachments. Arjuna lapses from rightful *rajoguna* by force of misapplied *sattvaguna*; he renounces, at the nick of time, every plighted pledge to carry the arms of war to victory for the vindication of right. The Vision Beatific provides an invigorating inflow of aid (*gathi praaninaam*) (1) to enable Arjuna to discover the truth that the whole order of things is ever more with the devoted votary of *swadharma*, with the person who discharges his duty without attachment and without expectation of reward; and (2) to uphold him constantly out of the fathomless depths of weakness and waywardness. The third manifestation is revealed to Udanka when he arraigns Krishna as the perpetrator of wholesale bloodshed on a vast scale, in as much as he did not prevent the war, even though he could have done it. This accusation

comes from a humane-hearted, righteous minded hater of blood-thirsty Mars, a sage of undefiled *Sattvaguna*; he strays away from his spiritual moorings when he entertains misgivings about the ways of the Divine Government of the universe. The Vision Beatific has a tranquillising and chastening effect on him and conveys the assurance that "God's in His heaven, All's right with the world" (*paavanam paavanaanaam*). Optimistic trust displaces disquieting doubt. Thus the Cosmic Manifestations serve different purpose on different occasions.

III - (lii) - 16 (6) Krishna's freaks : Yasoda's chastisement :

One day, Yasoda, who was occupied with churning curds, had a novel experience with her child, Krishna. She was feeling tired with the operation; her palms turned crimson; her upper garment slid aside; her necklaces and chains of pearls fell into disarray; her lotus-face was covered with a sheet of sweat; freed from the knot, her luxuriant locks of hair spread over her neck and shoulders in lustrous sheaves. The movements of her limbs and the tinglings of her armlets and anklets kept rhythm with her melodious song. At that time, Krishna dropped in from somewhere, walked towards his mother breathing hard, and with hasty, faltering steps, and caught hold of the churning-rod and demanded, as one famished, that he should be suckled at once. Yasoda stopped churning; seating her child on her lap and stroking his hair, she suckled him with fondness for a brief while. Then she noticed that milk was overflowing the pot which was placed on the oven. She placed the child on a seat and rushed to the fire-place to check further loss of milk. Krishna, who was partially fed, could not wait till his mother returned. He lost patience, turned peevish, broke into sobs and shattered the pot of curds with a piece of stone and helped himself to the butter therein. He left home in a fit of temper. The mother returned from the fire-place; saw what the little one had done during her short absence and smiled to herself. Not finding him there, she made a search and finally traced him to a neighbour's house.

Krishna was there, indeed; he mounted on a wooden mortar, reached the sling holding a pot, and drew out lumps of

butter from it to feed a monkey. Yasoda now could understand that the charges made against her darling by the gopikas were not without foundation in truth. She should do something at once to set matters right. But she wavered in her thoughts: "How am I to deal with him? Should I dismiss his acts as childish? No, even wise elders do not know better than he, the value of disciplined conduct. Should I frighten him with punishment? My mind shudders at the very thought....he is all that I can call my own....my own precious darling! Should I instruct him in the ways of good behaviour? He himself apologises for his lapses and promises, in advance, that he will mend himself. Should I have him confined to the house? Should I keep him isolated from others? There is no place which he does not visit; there is no person whom he does not meet when wanted. Fear does not cow him down; he knows no fear. He feels no company strange; he moves freely with everyone." Yasoda finally came to the conclusion that she was possibly spoiling the child by her excessive fondness for him. She should be stern in dealing with him and not spare the rod, if circumstances so warranted.

Yasoda waved the little wand in her hand and commanded Krishna to stay where he was. As she moved towards him in a menacing manner, the child jumped down from the mortar, and, like one frightened, ran with speed to escape his mother. Strange that Yasoda, a frail woman, chased him with determination to catch him, to catch whom even the accomplished sages and saints expressed woeful incompetence! Krishna played with his irate mother; he would hide behind a pillar; and as Yasoda approached, he would slide away; he would beg pardon of her with sobs and promise that he would never thieve again, he would shiver with fear, he before whom Fear himself squirms in panic! He would cry bitterly, rub his eyes and stain his face with collyrium; at the same time, he would be alert, watching her movements with side-glances so as to escape her grasp. Yasoda was very much tired; the chase was too hard for her; profuse sweat covered her body; her upper garment slid by, exposing her heavy heaving bosom; her slender waist trembled under exhaustion. She was about to

collapse. Krishna's heart melted to see his mother in that sad plight. He surrendered. Yasoda could have the satisfaction of catching the little thief; but she had not the heart to strike him with the cane in her hand. She addressed him thus: "Who are you, Sir? the great Sri Krishna; the virtuous gentleman who knows not how to steal, who never hankers after butter! Good. Darling, people declare that it is impossible to catch you, however hard they may try. But you cannot give me the slip. I know how to get at you, no other can. You go as you please, as the whim takes you, to any place; you stick to no principle; you do not stay steady. You take advantage of my inalertness, even if it be for a moment, and stray away in various ways. You do not give up playing in dirt; you do not hesitate to plunge into waters; you do not refrain from shaking massive pillars; you do not mind asking for trifles from others. You are not tired of obstructing the flow of waters; you do not care even to put on a garment, you go about naked. Krishna, why do you indulge in these perverse frolics? You exploit my lenience. You think that I do not know how to mend you. You will presently see how I can deal with you with sternness".

III - (iii) - 16 (7) Urukabandhanam

(Krishna fastened to a mortar)

Yasoda wanted to check Krishna from moving about by fastening his waist to the wooden mortar lying nearby. She brought a slender rope and wound it round the child's waist; but found it short by a couple of inches; she brought another and tied it to the previous one and tried again, only to find that the lengthened rope too fell short by a couple of inches! This process was repeated again and again and still the deficiency persisted. Yasoda and others stood perplexed. Poor lady, she was not aware that the stomach which she was trying to bind contained within itself all the created worlds; and that was why all the ropes employed for the purpose failed of their purpose. Yasoda's discomfiture at the failure of each of her efforts drove her to despair; she presented a pitiable picture with her face covered with beads of sweat, with her

locks of hair thrown into disarray, with exhaustion writ large on her limbs. She did not know what she should do next. She surrendered; Krishna saw her helplessness and yielded to her final effort to bind him. Here was Krishna, the Supreme Deliverer of people from their bonds, yielding to Yasoda's effort to bind him, even because he could not bear the sight of his mother in her extreme despondency. Here was Krishna, the Transcendental Lord—who could not be confined in Lakshmi's loving embrace, who could not be contained in the pure hearts of sages and yogis, who could not be brought within the gamut of Vedic incantations—cheerfully surrendering himself to his tired mother to be fastened to a wooden mortar! And Yasoda was happy for her son's docility. Be it noted that where *Karma* (works), *Jnana* (knowledge), *Sadhana* (spiritual exercise), *Dhyana* (meditation) fail, *Bhakti* and *Prapatti* (devotion and total surrender) succeed. Was not Krishna aware of the intensity of Yasoda's maternal love for him? The Lord Himself surrenders to those who realise their helplessness and throw themselves entirely upon His protection. This episode throws out a noteworthy suggestion to devotees as to how to keep the Lord bound by their heart-strings. All that they have to do to achieve this is to recall to mind all the brief, momentary spells of ecstatic experiences (which they have come across during their spiritual exercises) and piece them together into the cord of unbroken meditation (*dhyana*); and to repeat this process as often as they can. Then the Lord to whom they pay their constant and loving attentions willingly yields to them and makes their hearts His hallowed shrines.

Krishna allowed himself to be bound to show how amenable to mother's control he was; and he had another obligation to fulfil, for which the mortar would be useful. Two Yakshas, Nalakubara and Manigriva, sons of Kubera, were turned, under Narada's curse, into two *sal* trees, for their indifference to him, immersed as they were in self-forgetful sport with *apsaras* in Mandekini waters. On seeing Narada, the ladies hastened to cover their nakedness; but the princes swollen with pride and insolence, born of affluence and status, took no notice of the divine minstrel. Narada wanted to teach

them a lesson, to cleanse them of their arrogance and so cursed them to become *sal* trees on the earth and stay there till released by the touch of the sacred feet of Govinda; and he assured them, that they would then become mellowed into the Lord's devotees and regain their former positions. Krishna crawled to the trees dragging the heavy mortar behind him, pushed himself to the front through the narrow crevice between the trees and tugged with full strength to clear the mortar through it. The impact was so forceful that the trees fell, root and branch, with a thunderous noise. Two radiant celestials emerged from the ruins, prostrated before the child, and then arose and stood before him with hands joined in prayer: "You are no child; you are the Supreme, the Eternal One without beginning and end; the Universe is your outward manifestation. You are the changeless Lord without form or attributes, whom even the most competent sages are unable to contemplate upon; mystery shrouds your incarnations; and your sports are miracles, wrought for the good of the people and worlds. The words of the saint Narada have come true; and it is through his grace that we could set our eyes upon your radiant and graceful form. We pray that you will be pleased to vouchsafe us your blessings. May our ears ever revel in listening to songs in your praise; may our looks ever dwell on your amiable form; may our limbs ever engage themselves in your sacred service; may our heads ever bow in salutation at your feet; may our thoughts ever rest on you and your wonderful manifestations!" Krishna replied that those who rendered their duties without any lapse would find release from their bonds on having a glimpse of him, and that it was Narada's loving considerateness for them that enabled them to have that rare privilege, which would henceforth result in their thoughts ever hovering about him. The Yakshas proceeded to their homes, rejoicing in their new elevated status as devotees of the Lord.

The explosion caused by the felling of the *sal* trees sent shivers along the spines of Nanda and his associates, Yasoda and gopikas. They rushed to the place; they found the child bound to the mortar, calm and unruffled and unaffected

in any way. They could not account for the fall of the huge trees; there was no fierce gale blowing; there was no storm or thunder at the moment. This little child could not have done this miracle. They came to the conclusion that their habitation became subject to the visitations of evil portents. But the boys who were playing at the site told the elders that Krishna tugged at the trees with the mortar across their trunks and that the trees crashed down in an instant. They reported what they had actually witnessed. But the assembled people, in their wisdom, could not put their trust in their words, as they failed to satisfy their rational thinking. But Nanda, who knew that there was nothing impossible for this child to do, hastened to free him by cutting off the ropes binding him to the mortar. But to how few was this faculty given of visioning in the simple child the inaccessible Supreme?

Thus released, Krishna played as usual with the other children, sang to the rhythm of gopikas' clapping hands, cast trembling looks at the elders, and ran to his anxious mother and nestled close to her bosom. He diverted the people with his amusing pranks; but effectively threw upon them the illusion that he was no more than an ordinary child.



IV SOJOURN IN BRINDAVANA

IV - 17. OVER TO BRINDAVANA

IV - 17-(I) Shift to New Settlement :

The Gopa elders held a conference and discussed the terrible dangers that confronted them and how they got over them through Krishna's miraculous power. Upananda, an old and experienced leader, suggested that they should all move to Brindavana and set up a new settlement. The gopas accepted the suggestion; they collected their cattle and kept them to the fore as they shifted from Nendavraja; young men armed with spears, bows and arrows brought up the rear and guarded the flanks; old men, women and children mounted carts drawn by bulls; all their belongings were stacked in vehicles which trailed behind them; Rohini and Yasoda, with Balarama and Krishna, were seated in a chariot; they were the cynosure of all eyes. The new settlement was agog with activity; and after a few days the families settled down to normal routine.

Balarama and Krishna mixed well with boys of their age and enjoyed sharing their duties of tending cattle and actively participated in the rustic sports. They played on pipes and flutes and danced to the beat of drums; they enjoyed bouts of wrestling with friends; they revelled in contests of skill in shooting down fruits from trees; they took delight in measuring their strength with the animals of the forest and bringing them under control. They rejoiced in swimming competitions organised to test their skill and speed and staying power. Balarama and Krishna easily established their superiority over others by their skill, fearlessness and strength, and received recognition as leaders of the gopa boys.

IV - 17 - (ii) Vatsasura and Kapithasura :

One day, as the boys were tending cattle by the side of the river, Yamuna, Krishna noticed an attractive calf, moving with fond familiarity among the other calves. He drew Balarama's pointed attention to this peculiar new find among

the cattle; he went up to it and admiring its handsome features clasped its four legs and lumped them together with its tail, and hurled it against a wood-apple tree. The calf died and the tree collapsed; the calf was no calf and the tree was no tree; both were Rakshasas, Vatsasura and Kaplthasura, and both met with death so suddenly and swiftly. The skill of a marksman would be praised if he could bring down two birds at one shot; an artist would produce the maximum effect with minimum effort. And Krishna proved himself to be an economist and artist in marksmanship. The gopa boys clapped, shouted and danced in joy in admiration of Krishna's remarkable achievement. But they did not know that it was a mere child's play to One who reared, with fondness, the worlds as calves, to detect and destroy a Rakshasa in disguise as a fake calf.

Some scholars are of the opinion that Vatsasura stands for the feeling of taste (*Ruchi*) and Kaplthasura for that of smell (*Vaasana*). The calf in its search for juicy and tasteful fodder nibbles at every plant and herb and makes its choice according to what it relishes most. Kaplthasura and Vatsasura are close twins. The Wood-Apple tree spreads the flavours of its fruit far and wide and fascinates and invites people to enjoy them. The pity is that hankering after things of delicious taste and sweet fragrance does not cease when the capacity to enjoy them gets exhausted with satiety; but it becomes a part and parcel of the mind as residual tastes and latent tendencies. Spiritual aspirants should guard themselves against this insidious double menace and seek the Lord's gracious intervention which alone can eliminate it. By cultivating association with believers (*satpurushas*) and getting attached to them, they can rid themselves of *vasanas* which otherwise cling to them. By meditating on the Lord without break, they develop taste for Him and relish it to the exclusion of other tastes which look insipid in comparison. Contemplation on the Lord (*dhyana*) alone will, with the active aid it receives from close association with enlightened souls, eliminate, at a single sweep, residual tastes (*ruchis*) and latent tendencies (*vaasanaas*).

IV - 17. (iii) Bakasura :

The gopas who brought out the cattle at dawn to graze on the meadows became thirsty as the day advanced with simmering heat. They drove the herds for a refreshing bath to a pond; they slaked their thirst with its cool, clean waters. Then they noticed a Crane of huge dimensions, with spotless white wings and feathers and with a long hard beak, perching nearby; it looked like a mute anchorite engaged in ateady penance, in single-minded concentration on the Supreme Being. On noticing Krishna, the Crane (Bakasura) sprang into air, unfolded its strong, broad wings, opened its beak wide, and in a sudden swoop sucked little Krishna into its enormous throat. Not finding Krishna, his companions felt shocked; they became petrified and looked like lifeless bodies. They did not think it possible that Krishna had chosen to yield to the Crane and become a morsel to be gulped by it. They did not know that their companion was no other than the Supreme Lord, to whom devouring worlds and vomiting them out was a merry pastime; and that swallowing him was impossible for any demon. The little Krishna got stuck in the Crane's throat, and blazed forth like fire; unable to bear the scorching heat, the Crane made a huge effort to spew him out. The spectators breathed a sigh of relief on seeing Krishna out of danger. But the combatants were only half way through the conflict. The Crane failed in its attempt to swallow him; it now changed its tactics; it wished to put an end to him by cleaving him into pieces with its sharp beak. Krishna was quick to act; he caught hold of the upper and lower parts of the open beak and with a little effort slit through the entire body and threw it on the ground in an instant. The celestials rained flowers on Krishna; the gopa companions recovered from their shock; they embraced him and felt their spirits revived. They returned home and related the strange happenings to their elders. Wicked demons hurled themselves in quick succession on the little child, only to get consumed like flies in the blazing fire.

To appear to be different from what one really is, constitutes *Dumbha* or Pretentiousness. Baka answers to this description with his deceptive outside of speckless saintly purity,

concealing a hellish mind saturated with wicked intents and vengeful designs, perpetrating evil to others. He is a veritable "rogue in grain veneered over with sanctimonious theory." He attempts to keep the Supreme invisible to His devotees; he tries to swallow Krishna entire in one gulp; he does not know that he is biting more than he can chew, with the result that he is left with a singed throat. Then he adopts a new stratagem and attempts to cleave him through with his sharp beak. This venture proves fatal; he is greeted with a full length body-slit; the Supreme presents Himself in all His splendour before His devotees.

IV - 17 (iv) The Breakfast Party :

Krishna and his companions planned to hold an early breakfast party in the woods next morning. They rose long before dawn, freed the calves, shouldered their staffs from which the pots of rice, curd and pickles were suspended and moved out into the streets armed with spears, sticks, slings and nooses, and drove the cattle into the woods. Though they were having ornaments of gold, they chose to deck themselves with creepers smiling with flowers and buds, and shoots with dangling fruits; they blew horns and pipes, hummed with bees, danced with peacocks, sang with cuckoos and blackbirds; they forded mountain-streams, swam in river-waters; swayed to and fro in fibrous swings; played hide-and-seek among the thick shrubs; and indulged in wrestling and boxing, challenging one another to display their skill. It was hilarious merriment in which Balarama and Krishna played a prominent part. There was a free exchange of dishes, each helping himself to whatever he relished from another's pot; stealing became an amusing pastime. There was a lot of fun in the sport when a blind-folded person was to identify the companion who gave him a sharp knock with his knuckle. The gopa boys enjoyed full freedom to do what they liked with Krishna in these playful engagements. They embraced him; they wound their hands round his neck; they patted him on the back; they did not hesitate to kick him and deal him blows with their fists and thrust into his mouth delicacies half-eaten by them. How

exceptionally fortunate were these gopa boys that they could move in such close proximity and free familiarity with Krishna, the same as the Supreme Person who remained remote and was inaccessible to the yogis, sages, saints and devotees !

IV - 17 (v) Aghasura :

Aghasura was raging for revenge on hearing that Krishna put an end to his elder brother, Bekasura. He was a mighty giant whom the celestials held in dread and whose death they eagerly wished for. The Rakshasa was confident that he could bring ruin to the community by devouring Krishna and all the gopa boys and offered his services to Kamsa. He enlarged his dimensions; his lower jaw, out-stretched on the ground, covered the space of a Yojana and looked like an extensive meadow; his upper jaw resembled a mass of pitch-dark clouds with a sprinkling of crimson rays of the setting sun; the crevices between the fangs and the teeth appeared to be deep fissures; his looks flashed forest-fires and his mouth yawned a profound mountain cavern and his tongues dangled far and wide. The gopa boys took it as one of the fascinating wonders of Brindavana. But later they discovered that it was a terrible boa-constrictor; and they could even predict its evil intention. But they thought that with Krishna amidst them they could brave any danger; if the python meant any harm to them, it would go the way Bakesure had gone before it. They drove the calves into its cavernous mouth; they themselves brought up the rear. Krishna reflected for a moment how his simple innocent companions, unaware of the great risk involved, dared to march into the cavern, with all their herds of calves, with a cavalier, carefree indifference and putting their faith in him as a guarantee of their safety. Meanwhile, the huge python-demon swallowed in a sudden fervent gulp the brave tiny tots. Krishna felt miserable; it would be embarrassing to answer the anxious enquiries of the women at home as to what happened to their children. How could he relate to them the tragedy wrought by the python? Moreover, how could he leave his comrades to their fate and betray their trust in him as their saviour? So he decided to go the way his companions had gone and entered the cavernous

mouth, to the delight of Aghasura who felt that he had almost accomplished his vengeful design. But Krishna had his own thoughts as to how to defeat the demon's purpose. Krishna entered the throat of the python; then enlarged his dimensions and blocked the passage of breath. Aghasura wriggled for want of air; his head and sides burst open and he lay dead, emitting a wild, piercing shriek. The gopa boys and the calves emerged gracefully from the cavern like the moon and the stars coming out of a sheet of dense clouds. No wonder that Krishna split the body of a wicked serpent to rescue the gopa companions! Did he not humble the great Bali by depriving him of all his worlds for the sake of the celestials? It was a strange sight that the people gathered there were privileged to witness; a blazing light came out of the demon's carcass and entered Krishna's bosom. Such was the miraculous touch of the Supreme that Aghasura was cleansed of all his sins and shone like pure *Sattva* and got merged into Him. Nothing strange in this translation, when it is remembered that Hari absorbs within Himself any one who sets his mind, in love or hate, on Him even for a brief while! The celestials rained flowers; the *apsaras* danced in ecstasy; the *siddhas* and *gandharvas* sang in concert; Brahma came down to rejoice in the glorious *kaumara* achievement of Krishna, just when he was five years of age. The huge carcass of the serpent dried and served as the arena for the sports of gopa boys for a long time.

To claim as his own what is not his, comes to be regarded as sin; this sin of acquisitiveness (*duraasa*) stands as an obstacle to the attainment of God. Aghasura represents this colossal sin. He believes that there is nothing beyond his reach; nothing which he cannot appropriate as his own. Krishna has foiled his brother Bakasura's attempt to keep him out from his comrades and even to nullify him. Aghasura's grand design is not merely to entice the gopa boys and their cattle into his cavernous mouth but to inveigle Krishna also into it, so that he may effect a wholesale annihilation. Like Aghasura, worldly pleasures tempt people into their wide-open traps; and as the victims indulge in them, they come to recognise that they yield no joy and realise that they are misled and are

heading towards ruin. They regret their lapse and hope relief will surely come from their Lord in whom they put their trust. Krishna establishes, by his triumph over demon, the eternal truths that the Supreme alone, and else, is the Eternal Possessor of all affluence and power that it is only through His sufferance that people that right for a while; and that release from the excessive greed can come only through His intercession. Spiritual aspirants can derive these illuminating lessons from the episode of Aghasura.



IV - 18. BRAHMA'S MANOEUVRE

Krishna rescued the gopa boys and the calves from Aghasura and proceeded with them further into the wood. He noticed a tank with deep, cool waters; sweet-scented blossoms with swarms of bees humming about them presented a feast to the sight; a gentle breeze rocked the creepers and flowers. Krishna suggested to his companions that they relax for a time in those pleasant surroundings and have breakfast, and leave the calves to slake their thirst and graze on the luscious grassy meadows. The boys fell in with his proposal as they were tired in the hot sun and were hungry. They sat in a semi-circle with Krishna in the centre. They emptied the breakfast baskets into the lotus-leaf and large flowers as their plates; and then they enjoyed morsels of food flavoured with pickles. One boy would throw a morsel to his friends with repeated smackings of a spicy pickle though he alone had that speciality; another would make a dash for it, movement, close on him and snatch it away; a third would suddenly swoop on his neighbour's plate, grasp a morsel, swallow it, and show his mouth to prove his innocence. Another glutton would declare that he would consume morsels of dishes of a half-dozen companions and challenge any

compete with him; and when no immediate response was forthcoming, he would keep his word, perform the feat to the surprise and delight of the gathering. Another boy would distribute his dishes liberally among his friends, saying that not to do so smacked of narrow selfishness. Another would freely help himself to whatever articles of diet attracted him from the plates of his companions. One would engage the group with witty and humorous stories. Exchange of jokes was a common amusement. The spirit of *camaraderie* and conviviality reigned supreme. Krishna was the cynosure of all eyes. He tightened the robe around his waist and thrust his flute into it; he held the wand and the horn tight in left armpit; he took a morsel of rice soaked in cheesy curd into his left palm and squeezed pieces of pickle collected from friends in the spaces between fingers; he sat in the centre among his companions and ate his food, and engaged them with a sweet smile and pleasant conversation. They were blissfully unaware of the passage of time; in Krishna's company, time slid into eternity. The celestials themselves were astonished at the great good fortune of the Yadava boys to have *Yagabhakta* for their companion at their breakfast.

While the boys were thus engaged in merry-making, the calves strayed away farther and farther into the woods nibbling the fresh tender blades of grass. The gopa boys were struck with panic as they could not find them anywhere in the surrounding lawns. Krishna allayed their fears, told them that he would trace them and bring them back and desired them to stay there till his return. He set out on the search with evident enthusiasm; he spotted their usual haunts — where the calves grazed, where they slaked their thirst, where they herded together and where they separated; but after going a long distance, he found no tracks of them. He made a thorough search among the thick woods and shrubs, along banks of streams, ponds and mountain-sides; but the effort ended in failure. He wondered at their total disappearance and returned to the starting-point, only to discover that all his comrades too vanished. He called out for them but received no response. Brahma was the author of this mischievous mystery. He hid

the calves and the children *en masse*. His curiosity about child Krishna's strength was roused when he saw him throttle Aghasura's throat and rescue the calves and the gopa boys from his huge stomach, and revive them without any hitch whatsoever in this glorious operation. Brahma was eager to see how the child Krishna would tackle this critical situation. Krishna was the all-knowing One; he was merely playing the part of a human child. He could, therefore, divine that Brahma played this fraudulent trick on him. Brahma deluded the calves and the gopa boys; so far, it was all right. But did he imagine that he could, with the same facility, deceive Krishna also? Was he not aware that Krishna was the incarnation of Hari, the unrivalled manipulator of delusion into which He could throw the worlds at will and bring them out of it with perfect ease? Could he think, even for a moment, that the child Krishna, in his perplexity, would turn to him and petition for the release of the boys and the calves? Or could he presume to rouse the ire of Krishna and invite him to a confrontation with him? If he had thought along these lines, Brahma was making a terrible miscalculation; and he did really go wrong! He thought that he was the Creator; and that none but he could bring any being into existence; and that, consequently, the child Krishna had no other alternative than approaching him to restore his companions and the calves. It was that arrogance, that superiority complex, that blinded him when he played this deception; he seemed to have forgotten for the moment as to who gave him his being.

Krishna smiled at the foolhardiness of Brahma. He had his own unique way of defusing crises, of solving problems. He could not go home alone and cause agony to the gopa mothers by announcing the mysterious disappearance of his companions. He thought of assuming the forms and features of all the missing boys and calves and conduct himself exactly as they would, while maintaining his own identity at the same time. He willed to become many; with him wish and its fulfilment went together; there would be no interval between entertaining a wish and its translation into reality. As evening set in, every housewife welcomed her boy and the calves pertaining to the

household: in form and feature, in gesture, speech and behaviour, there was no trace of difference from the originals both in the boys and in the calves; there was such perfect identity that left no room for doubt. All the myriad forms of life are merely the Lord's manifestations; He could not be identified with any *specific* individual form, for such an identity would deprive Him of His universality. Assumption of numerous, diverse forms at the same time presented no problem to Krishna as he was the Incarnation of the Lord. He was the boy giving directions; He was the boy executing the commands; He was the calf submitting to the order — He was here, there, everywhere in each and every house; assuming the forms of the child and of the calves belonging to that particular family. He was welcomed, bathed and suckled by the mothers deeming him as their own children; and Krishna responded to their endearments in the same way as their children were wont to. The cows in different homes hailed their calves (whose shapes Krishna assumed) and fondly licked them and treated them to a liberal downpour of milk from their lusty udders. The gopa mothers and the cows seemed to grow fonder of their offspring as days passed; they did not know that Krishna was the recipient of their loving attentions. Their fondness grew into infatuation. Krishna managed this sport to perfection for one year; no one could have an inkling into its secret.

One day, as Krishna and Balarama were tending the calves, the cows which were grazing at a long distance on the sides of Govardhana mountain, happened to notice the calves. Unable to contain their love, the cows left their pastures, sprang into the air and galloped in a frenzy with uplifted tails, and reached the meadow, hailing the calves, and rejoiced in feeding them with overflowing milk from their udders. The boys wondered and felt happy at this unexpected development and allowed the calves to have their fill. The gopa men failed in their attempts to check the cows from rushing to their calves, and looked on helplessly. They hastened after them, greatly annoyed; but when they reached the meadow and saw their children, their mood changed; they picked them up, hugged them, kissed them; they were beside themselves with

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joy. They left the place, after a while, driving the cows before them, contented and happy. Balarama who witnessed this scene was surprised at the extraordinary fondness which the cows developed for the calves and at the exciting infatuation that the gopas displayed for the children. Balarama himself experienced the same fond attachment to the calves and to the gopa boys as he felt towards Krishna. He wondered what could be the cause for this unique excitement. He came to the conclusion that Krishna alone must have wrought this delusion; no other person could have fooled him; he saw Krishna clearly in every one of his companions and in each of the calves. He explained his problem to Krishna. He was thinking previously that the cows inherited the tendency of sages and the gopas of the celestials. Now he discovered that the calves and the children tending them were no other than Krishna himself. Krishna assured him that he was absolutely correct in his conjecture.

A year in the terrestrial world was equivalent to a moment in Satyaloka. Brahma descended to the earth; he saw before him all the children and the calves leading normal life; they were the same as those whom he still kept drowsy under his power of delusion. He was perplexed: he was the only Brahma and there was no second; he alone could create living beings; and he did not bring into existence those whom he now saw; how then could they emerge into life was beyond his comprehension. Brahma played a deceptive trick on One who could, without any attachment, throw the whole universe into delusion, with the result that he himself fell into Hari's trap. Brahma racked his brains to find the rationale of this mysterious phenomenon before him, but remained perplexed. It was then that Krishna lifted the veil; Brahma had before him a magnificent sight; all the gopa children became transfigured into so many replicas of Vishnu. They had bodies of sapphire glow; they were adorned with crowns, diamond ear-studs, anklets, bracelets, wristlets and rings and waist-bands, all made of gold, and decked with garlands of fragrant flowers and aromatic basil leaves; they were clad in purple silk; their faces shone with mellow-light; their looks rained

love; ineffable bliss radiated from them. Celestial minstrels and danseuses attended on them. Brahma became transfixed to the spot, unable to see the Effulgence before him. It took some time for him to recover and realise that he was in Brindavana, a place sanctified by the wanderings of Hari, a place which, as a consequence, became the mainstay of affluence; it thrived as habitation of beasts, birds and reptiles which were freed from their native mutual animosities; and it shone as rendezvous of people who overcame the inner enemies of Desire, Anger, Greed, Attachment, Arrogance and Jealousy. There he saw Krishna, holding in his palm a morsel of rice mixed with creamy curd, and calling upon his companions to have their breakfast. Brahma got down from his swan-mount, prostrated before the divine child touching the latter's feet with his four crowned heads and drenching his faces with tears of joy. He slowly rose, joined his hands in salutation, and with single-minded devotion set up a paean of praise to him. "Lord, how futile penance is, however great it be, if it is not associated with devotion. Intellectuals might be able to calculate the number of drops of mist and particles of dust: but they could never estimate Your attributes, even because they are so limitless, so innumerable. How foolish of me to have tried to embarrass You by exercising my power of delusion with a wish to measure the extent of Your greatness! Can the forest-fire outshine the Source-Flame from which it has originated? Lord, pardon me for the offence I have given You. Born of *rajoguna*, I have become proud in the belief that I am the creator and arrogated to myself the supremacy of the Lord. It is the height of presumption for me to measure swords with You; there can be no comparison between a speck of dust and a huge mountain, between an earthen lamp and an effulgent luminary. I crave for Your mercy. Does the mother take offence when the child in her womb kicks her and causes her some discomfort? You hold the whole universe, the innumerable worlds, in their subtle forms within Yourself; and am I not a child of Yours whose misdemeanours merit forgiveness? You are within and without; You have no definite form or features; You are indefinable. Though I have emanated from the lotus-stalk

shooting up from Your navel, I have failed, despite a strenuous quest over a hundred years to trace my source, my parent. None can unravel the mystery that surrounds You. You have become one with every calf and every gopa child and behaved as they will in the normal course of life; You have blessed me with the vision of Your self-multiplied manifestation as the adorable Vishnu in all those children; none can comprehend Your innumerable sportive frolics and Your mysterious preniks. The ignorant only consider that Brahma is the Creator, that You are the Preserver and that Rudra is the Destroyer. But You are all-in-all. Who knows what form You assume and where You abide and for what purpose? You are the Self-illuminated Supreme Spirit, Eternal, Immanent, Transcendental Being, Personification of Truth, Knowledge and Bliss, (*sat chit ananda*) Fountain of Love and Mercy. Only the elect few, the illumined souls, are aware that You are both the Soul (*Jeevaatma*) and the Soul of souls (*Paramaatma*). To them, the world ceases to exist; *Samsara* does not bind them; and where there is no bondage, the question of release does not arise. The Ignorant, not knowing You as Spirit, deem You as one associated with body and make a vain search for You in the world outside. The enlightened, on the other hand, look within themselves and revel in Your presence. It is only those who serve at Your foot-stool, those who are chastened with a particle of dust off Your hallowed feet, who can understand Your greatness and enjoy Your glory. O gracious Lord, vouchsafe to me the coveted privilege of being one of those who pass for Your own and render devoted service to You! How can I gauge the great good fortune of the cows which fed You, believing You to be their own calves; how can I ever imagine the bliss the gopa women enjoyed suckling You under the impression that You are their own beloved offspring? How immeasurable is the affluence of the gopas and the gopikas who move with such fondness and familiarity with You in all the activities of mundane life and consecrate their services with such devout attention? Of what worth is the status of Brahma in comparison? A few particles of dust off the feet of any one of these devotees confer greater bliss on those who have them sprinkled on their heads. You have

graciously provided shelter within You even for Putana and other demons who came on purpose to put an end to You. It is difficult to imagine what rewards await these inhabitants of Brindavana who have unreservedly and whole-heartedly placed themselves, their women, their sons and daughters, their homes, their cattle and other acquisitions and properties, their bodies and their lives, at Your disposal. I know that You are the All-seeing, All-knowing, Lord of the Universe. I pray that You will graciously condone my unforgivable lapse; I shall for ever remain grateful for such mercy". Brahma passed through the fiery ordeal of repentance and thus cleansed himself and took leave of Krishna. The calves and the gopa children reappeared as mysteriously as they disappeared earlier under Brahma's manoeuvre. But the boys appeared to have been only waiting for the return of Krishna with the straying calves to join them at their breakfast. They were blissfully ignorant that a year elapsed between Krishna setting out in search of the calves and his return. Krishna smiled and participated in their repast; and pointing to the carcass of the huge python moved out with them to the village. The children recounted to their mothers how a huge reptile swallowed them and how Krishna rescued them by throttling it. This daring exploit was of a piece with Krishna's previous achievements; and the whole village was one in acclaiming the divine child as their protector and saviour.

Just a few observations before the close. The community lunch held by the gopa boys in the woods, with Krishna and Balarama participating on an equal footing, has its lessons for the spiritual aspirants. The boys move about on terms of easy familiarity with their leaders; they snatch with carefree abandon contents from one another's lunch-plates; they indulge in jovial banter; they play practical jokes; they even exchange blows in fun and frolic. And Krishna and Balarama join in this hilarious merriment without any reservation. True; the gopa boys must have accumulated a huge pile of merit in their previous lives *Krita punya punjam*, to earn that close affinity with Krishna. They are *sages (jnanis)* who know how inseparably they are related to him and how totally they belong to him; they are *devatees (bhaktas)* who feel how strongly

they love him and how devoutly they have consecrated their all-bodies, minds, hearts and souls — to his service. They live, move and have their beings in the Supreme; and it is this inseparable affinity of the devotees with the Deity, it is this sharing of bliss in such close *camaraderie*, that is pictured forth in the community-feast in the woods. Suka is mightily pleased with this sight of the Deity and the devotees losing themselves in shared bliss, and declares his admiration for the gopa boys for their devotion and commitment to Krishna's service. But Brahma, who too has witnessed the scene, reacts in a different way; he wishes to separate them; he feels jealous of their happiness in union. He, too, is a great devotee of Vishnu. No doubt about it. But the *rajasic* impulse in him gains ascendancy; he forgets for the nonce that he is the offspring of Vishnu and that Krishna is no other than the Divine Incarnation. The consciousness that he is the creator and the self-conceitedness that there is none superior to him, unfortunately propel him to measure swords with Krishna, whom he deems to be a common human child. Thus, even staunch devotees sometimes lapse into arrogant escapades and meet with humiliating discomfitures. The Lord has His own graceful ways of bringing them to their senses and making them realise, and repent for, their thoughtless behaviour. Brahma is not *punished* for his pride; only his sense of self-importance is annihilated. There is no word 'punishment' in God's dictionary; but 'purification' finds place in it. Brahma becomes chastened when his temporary recalcitrance is rewarded with the glorious vision of the Lord manifesting Himself severally and collectively in all the calves and the gopa boys at the same time. He makes ample amends for his folly and prays for Krishna's pardon.



IV - 19. BALARAMA AND KRISHNA AS LEADERS

Balarama and Krishna now transited from childhood (kaumara) to boyhood (pauganda) as they completed five years of age. One day, as they went into the woods with the calves, Krishna made some observations to Balarama about the behaviour of certain objects of nature: "Look, brother, how the branches of trees laden with flowers and fruits bend and touch your feet, praying for redemption from their separation (*saakhlitvam*); notice how these bees come close to you, humming your sanctifying name; see how the peacocks dance for sheer delight deeming your blue garment to be a dark cloud; behold how the herd of deer cast shy glances at you in the same way as the beloved gopikas; listen how the blackbirds (Koils) intone their musical notes so as to catch your ear. The creatures of the woods deem themselves blessed that you are pleased to visit them. The earth is sanctified with the touch of your feet on her carpet of grass; the multifarious shrubs and creepers rejoice when your nails tickle them; the mountains and rivers, the animals and birds, acquire a bright glow on the impact of your gracious looks; the gopikas hold that they have attained fulfilment of their lives (*dhanyatvam*) as they experience your warm hug". Krishna, thus, complimented his brother even while spending his time in diverse occupations. He would hum with the swarm of bees as they go in quest of honey from flowers; he would tune in with a flight of swans in their musical concert; he would join a group of peacocks and participate in their ecstatic dance; he would stride along by a herd of elephants imitating their majestic gait; he would display his ventriloquist-skill by reproducing the notes of various birds in a perfect, faultless manner. Krishna would summon cows grazing at remote places by lovingly calling them, in his stentorian voice, by their pet-names: *Purnachandrika*, *Gautamiganga*, *Sudhaajalaraasi*, *Meghamaalika*, *Chintoamani*, *Surabhi*, *Manoharini*, *Sarvamangala*, *Mandaakini*, *Subhaangi*, *Mandamaaruti*, etc. It was noteworthy that they responded to his call with spontaneous readiness. Another factor that attracted attention was Krishna's deferential attitude towards Balarama and his efforts to keep him in good humour in all the pleasant diversions and amusing sports. The

Supreme Lord who strolled along the highways of the Vedas and Upanishads now indulged in roaming about the alleys and bylanes in the thick forests; the Reveller who relaxed on the cool soft coils of the King of Serpents (*Aadi Seshha*) now took delight in resting on beds of hard boughs and coarse leaves; the Diver who penetrated into the deep recesses of the reflective and meditative minds of sages (*Yogis*) now found pleasure in surveying the deep caves of the mountains all around; the Enchanter who felt exhilarated in the company of Kamala now drew considerable comfort in getting enmeshed in the loving attentions of the charming gopika women; the strong Sustainer whom the worlds looked up to for refuge, now felt elated in seeking shelter in the shades of trees; the Connoisseur whose taste found satisfaction only in the sacrificial offerings, now found relish in the fruits and berries of the wild woods. What a glorious transformation of the inaccessible Supreme Being into a familiar human child, hob-nobbing with the innocent rustics of Brindavana ! Look at Krishna's companions, how loving and considerate, how loyal and devoted, to their little master ! Should Krishna feel tired, they would enthusiastically carry him on their backs by turns; should he go to sleep, his comrades would solicitously make their thighs pillows for his head to rest on; should he sweat by exposure to sun, his friends would plunge forward to fan him with twigs of tender leaves; should he tread a long distance and show signs of fatigue, his followers would vie with one another to give him relief by pressing his feet. The gopas and the gopikas, all the residents of Brindavana, seemed to be instinctively inclined towards the charming child and they rendered loving services to him in ever so many ways for the sheer pleasure they gave him. They were not aware that, by so doing, they were getting expiated of the sins accumulated by them in all their previous births.



IV - 20. DHENUKASURA

Sridama, one of the gopals, informed Balarama and Krishna that, close by, there was a grove of palm trees fully laden with ripe fruits; but none dared enter it for fear of the demon, Dhenuka. This Rakshasa and his large contingent of associates and relatives infested the extensive grove, assuming the forms of lusty donkeys. Whenever men strayed into the region, attracted by the luscious fruit and their scent, Dhenuka made a feast of them. Sridama expressed that the fragrance of the ripe fruits provoked the desire of all his companions to taste them, now that they could have no fear of demons while in the company of the two miracle-workers. Pleased with his proposal, the brothers marched ahead to the grove with their friends. Balarama, like a mighty elephant, shook the lofty palms with his strong arms and the fruits fell in plenty on the ground with a loud thud. Roused by the noise, Dhenuka rushed out to put an end to the enemy who dared trespass into his realm: his eyes flashed fire, his forked ears stood stiff; his tail wafted vigorously; the earth quaked as his legs stamped on it; he dealt a fierce kick on Balarama's bosom with his hind legs. The demon wished to bite him with his teeth; but as his enemy did not give him scope for it, he cast angry looks at him and continued to rain kicks on him with his sturdy legs. Balarama felt annoyed with the donkey's assault; he caught hold of his four legs and held them together in grip in one hand, swirled the body till life left it and struck the carcass against the crest of a palm tree. The impact was so terrible that the palm shook to its roots and fell on the tree next to it; and that tree also suffered a similar fall. This process continued till the original force generated by Balarama in flinging Dhenuka exhausted itself. The devastation that resulted was similar to the havoc caused by a fierce gale mowing the trees in a row. Hearing about the death of Dhenuka, his relatives and retinue, rushed to the grove as donkeys to take revenge on his killers. Krishna and Balarama had a field day with them; they had an amusing sport, catching their legs and holding them together in a single grip and hurling them at

palm-tree tops. The ground acquired a ghastly look, covered as it was with the broken limbs of the demons and the severed parts of the trees. It was a glorious day for mortals as they could, on that day, enjoy eating the palm-fruits; it was a festive day for the cattle, too, for they could for the first time graze on the luxuriant meadows of that grove. Krishna and Balarama wended their way homeward with their companions. The gopas, particularly the gopikas, felt charmed by looking at their favourite Krishna as he returned from the woods with the herds of cattle: his turban sporting the peacock feather and his forelocks were soiled with the dust raised off the hooves of cattle; but his amiable smile and loving looks brightened his face and the garlands of wild flowers wafted fragrance. The gopikas cast their looks on his lotus-face and sucked his sweetness (as bees would of the lotus-blossoms) and felt relieved of the misery of separation from him all day long. Rohini and Yasoda were eagerly waiting for the return of their children; they welcomed them, bathed them, dressed them, fed them and put them to sleep with loving care and solicitude.

The donkey typifies stupidity and intransigence. It relies upon the superiority of its strength: it thinks it can cleave the enemy who faces it into pieces with its hard sharp teeth; it believes it can shatter the breast of the opponent attacking from the rear by battering him with its powerful hind legs. As it lacks brains, it does not imagine what happens to it when it is suspended with its legs caught in a grip. It refuses to learn from experience; that shows its stubbornness. Dulness and insensitivity, foolishness and petulance, when combined with greed and violence, become a menace to general weal and consequently deserve to be eliminated. Dhenuka was such a beast. "Eat, drink and be merry" seemed to sum up his attitude to life. Pampering the body was his sole occupation and delight. Finer values—intellectual, moral or spiritual—did not exist for him. Was there any sense in his greedy acquisition of the palm-grove and its extensive meadows and arrogant dominance over them, and in his aggressiveness to preserve that meaningless monopoly, denying

their use by those who needed them most? He deserved to be bundled up, whirled and smashed, for the good of the world. Spiritual aspirants do well to understand that they *eat to live* and *not live to eat*; and that happiness lies in minimising their wants and sharing their affluence with more needy persons.



IV - 21. KALEEYA MARDANAM

One day, it happened that Krishna alone led the gopa boys into the woods with the cattle. Balarama could not go with them. Exposed to the hot sun, the boys and the cattle felt thirsty; they went to the vast tank Kalindi, which happened to be the residence of the vicious Serpent Kaliya, and drank off its waters. As the waters became poisoned with the venom of Kaliya, the cattle and the boys collapsed after quenching their thirst. Krishna, the Master Yogi, could divine the cause of their disaster; he directed his concentrated nectarine looks on them and restored them to life and activity. They knew that Krishna was responsible for their revival and felt grateful to him.

Krishna did not rest with saving them from death. He wanted to find a permanent solution and make the waters of the lake safe for drinking by living creatures. He found the waters boiling with the fiery venom of the serpent-monster; even the birds flying above would get scorched to death, should the vapours rising from the lake touch them. He should do something, and that at once, to set matters right. He mounted a tree with branches extending over the lake; girded up his loins with the purple silk garment; tidied up his locks of hair with the turban sporting the peacock feather, threw a challenge to the enemy by striking a loud rap on his own shoulder, readied his feet with the application of pressure on the branch, and

took a headlong plunge into the centre of the lake. The sound of his impact with the waters was reverberated by all quarters; waters themselves suffered a terrible collision, with his plunge causing a yawning chasm at the centre and a thrill sounding their fathomless depths. Having had previous experience in swimming as a mighty Turtle during the churning operations of the Sea of Milk for nectar, Krishna showed his adroitness in buffetting the deep waters with his sturdy arms thus provoking a great cataclysm. Kaliya was furious at the bravado of a little brat causing such convulsion in his lake. He wished to teach him a lesson how risky it was to confront one like him. He would burn him to ashes with the fiery darts of his irresistible venom and let the world know his capacity for devastation. Breathing fire and spreading a vicious smoke-screen, Kaliya rushed towards the boy and bit him hard with his sharp poisonous fangs. Not content with that, the Serpent-lord bound him hard in his long vigorous coils. He did not know that his victim was the mighty hero from Brindavana, the daring boy with the form of a dense dark cloud, the carefree kid who strolled in waters for sheer joy, the sportive lad clad in purple silk to whom fear was alien. He was happy to find the boy helplessly imprisoned in his coils in an almost collapsed condition. The gopa boys noticed this catastrophe; they raved and wailed; the cows and calves and bulls gave up grazing and stood aghast shedding tears of bitter grief. The elements shivered; portents appeared in the heavens; meteors and shooting stars burnt their trail across the skies; the men and women in Brindavana experienced a simultaneous twitching of the eyes foreboding evil; Nanda and Yasoda, gopa elders and gopa women, suspected that Krishna and his companions and the cattle — all were involved in a common danger. They were seized by panic; they could not stay in the village even for a moment. Balarama, who knew that Krishna and those with him could come to no harm, did not make any attempt to remove their fear; he joined them in their flight into the woods. Following the track of Krishna's foot-prints, they passed woods and meadows and came to the snake-infested lake, where a terrible, pathetic sight greeted them. They were stricken with unbounded anguish when they saw the helpless Krishna bitten

by the vicious serpent and caught in his coils. The women wept bitterly calling aloud Krishna by name; some of them fell foul of Fate for this tragic mishap; others embraced Yasoda and tried to assuage her grief. In their agony they addressed Krishna thus : "you used to meet half-way people who came to see you; how is it you keep yourself away from them today ? You condescended to cast gracious glances at those who came to look you up; how is it you do not even open your eyes today ? When people hesitantly attempted to go near you, you made haste to draw them towards you; how is it you refrain from such gesture today ? When some one hailed you by your name, you gave an immediate response; how is it you seem to be unaware today that so many people address you by name ? The moment a person thought of you, you also thought of him — such telepathy was in evidence previously; how is it you have cut off all such intuitive contact today and kept yourself aloof ?" They were beside themselves with grief, as they were passionately in love with him. Nanda and Yasoda could not contain their grief. They broke out in tears : "Darling, you did freely suck in the poisonous milk of the wicked Putana without any harm; how unfortunate that you now succumb to this serpent's venom! Alas! how bitterly you must have trembled when the serpent bit you, how peevishly you must have rated Destiny, how pathetically you must have thought of us during the hour of agony! If the serpent has spared you and struck us instead, you will have been there to rescue us from trouble. Alas, of what use is our existence, when we have to look on so helplessly, incapable of rendering assistance to you? Beloved One, how can we bear this tragic sight ? You do not look at us with a smiling face; you do not amuse your comrades with your entertaining talk; you do not cast a spell of charm on the spectators with your lively dance, with the tiny bells of your anklets keeping rhythmic time. Who will give us joy hereafter ? Who will feast our ears with melodious prattle and our eyes with smiling looks ? Who will glide into our hug and make our limbs blessed ? If you do remain encoiled there, who is to be our lord and protector ? How can we live without you ? World without you is no place for us; life without you is not worthwhile." — All the assembled residents of Brindavana

were unanimous in echoing the sentiments expressed by their leader, Nanda. They wept embracing one another and prepared themselves to die by entering the poisoned waters of the lake. Balarama saw their miserable plight and promptly intervened. He told them that they had not fully appreciated the powers of Krishna and exhorted them not to lose courage but show forbearance for a while. He restrained them from executing their hasty resolve to enter the lake and die *en masse*.

Krishna noticed how deeply immersed in grief his devotees were; but he played the part of a mere human boy for a couple of minutes more. Then he began expanding his body; the coils gave way; the serpent stopped biting; Kaliya raised his hoods spouting smoke; his nostrils were blocked with his own venom; he stood like a column of smoke, breathing hard and staring at different directions. Krishna struck him a blow with his raised hand, caught hold of his jaws, lifted him as his eyes dripped vicious venom, and whirled him and cast him down with perfect ease. Without much ado, he jumped on the hoods of Kaliya and turning them into a stage, made bright by their diamonds and corals, he danced with the astute skill of an expert in the art. The agitated Yamuna billows provided the sonorous accompaniment of a drum; the choristers of Brinda-vana supplied the music; the rhythmic notes of swans marked time like cymbals; the denizens of the celestial worlds, who assembled to watch the scene, formed the audience. As the tempo of the dance increased, Krishna's jingling feet stamped the hoods with a greater celerity and harder pressure and his face beamed with a wreath of smiles.

The Serpent-lord could no longer bear the strain; blood gushed out of his several mouths; he was fully exhausted and was on the point of collapse. He reflected how the celestials lost their strength when his fiery venom struck them and how they had to wriggle and die under its destructive potency. He wondered how this boy not only remained secure from his fiery poison but also acquired strength to crush his hoods with a vigorous dance. This boy, he concluded, was no other than the Supreme Lord of the entire universe. He humbly surrendered

to him and implored pardon and protection. The wives of Kaliya witnessed their lord's plight and were very much perturbed. They approached Krishna with a heart-rending lamentation, laced with words of true understanding of the divinity of the tormentor : "Lord, you have incarnated on the earth on purpose to punish the wicked; and the chastisement you have given to the cruel Kaliya cannot be deemed as unfair, for he deserves it. How can any one accuse you of vindictiveness, when you extend generous considerateness even towards the sons of your avowed enemies ? It is not a display of your anger but an act of your grace, that we of a wily, venomous race are brought under subjugation, only to be chastened of our evil propensities. How great must have been the penance, how flawless and high-minded the deeds, performed by this Kaliya in his previous births that he could have the privilege of receiving the impressions of your sacred feet on his hoods ! It was only after years of prolonged rigorous penance, of sedulous performance of several rites, that Sri Lakshmi could earn the qualification to touch the particles of dust off your sacred feet. It was a miracle of your inexplicable grace that this Serpent-lord should, without undergoing any such hard spiritual discipline, earn a similar distinction. Those who have received this converted blessing will reject, if offered, the position of Indra (the lord of the celestials), even the status of Brahma (the creator), not to speak of seats of lesser glamour of Emperors and the like. Though compounded of grave sins and wicked aberrations, this serpent has attained the bliss that most of those who are battered by the flings and arrows of mundane life aspire and strive for and fail to achieve. O Supreme Lord, we pray that you will be pleased to forgive us of our misdemeanours, in the same way as fathers ignore the lapses of their children. We admit that our lord is wicked; yet, we cannot endure the thought of being deprived of our auspicious marital glow; we earnestly entreat you to spare the life of our husband; See how miserable he looks ! His heads are crushed; he is in a critical condition, gasping for breath; his life may ebb out at any instant. Do take pity on him, vouchsafe him a fresh lease of life and unite us with him in renewed holy wedlock. We do reassure you that he will desist from his past misdemeanours, and turn a new

leaf in his life, and submit himself henceforth to your command and direction. O gracious lord, we are your humble supplicants; we seek refuge in you; grant our prayer with your usual mercifulness."

Krishna melted at the pathetic appeal of the sorrowing wives of Kaliya and put a stop to his lively dance and stepped down from his hoods. The Serpent-lord heaved a sigh of relief, slowly recovered the vitality of his limbs, and trembling with grief and shame prostrated before the Supreme and made a confessional submission: "Crooked are our movements, full of bends and turns; terrible are our heads spewing fires of fatal venom; wickedness and villainy, arrogance and vindictiveness, are our native, racial attributes; no wonder that our aberrations emanate from our very constitution. Sire, you are the Creator of the whole universe and we, the Serpents, form part of your design. You are the Omniscient, Omnipotent Lord; how can we, ignorant and passionate creatures, pierce through the veil of your mystery? How can I rate my exceptional good fortune in that my heads are sanctified with a shower of the particles of dust off your feet—a favour that Rishis like Sanaka covet and aspire for. What greater favour need I ask for? Your wish is our law. Pray, do as you wish; it is up to you to forgive me and give me a fresh lease of life; or punish me and put an end to this abominable existence. The choice is yours and I shall gladly abide by it".

Krishna heard the confession of Kaliya and the prayer of his queens. He issued his command that Kaliya should take his abode in the sea and leave the lake with his wives, children, kith and kin and retinue, so that the waters, rid of all venom and its offshoots, become safe for use by men and cattle. He recalled to Kaliya's mind how he was terribly afraid of Garuda's retaliation (when he deprived the latter of his share of the offerings made by people) and fled from Ramanaka island and took refuge in that lake, knowing that Garuda could visit the place on peril of death under the curse of an anchorite by name Saubhari. Krishna assured Kaliya that Garuda would not harass him; for the impressions of the

Lord's feet stamped on his heads would guarantee his safety. Kaliya and his queens now breathed freely; they expressed their gratitude to Krishna and made lavish offerings of ornaments of gold and diamonds, fabrics of fine silky texture, phials of scented ointments, and a garland of fresh black tulips, and humbly took leave of him.

Dressed in new apparel and decked with bright ornaments, little Krishna emerged from the lake and walked towards his people. Yasoda and Rohini, Nanda and Sunanda, the gopas and the gopikas, glimpsed their darling from a distance; they broke loose from fainting fits with a vigorous spurt; they felt an exhilarating joy in his victorious return. Balaram was the first to welcome him with an enthusiastic embrace. His advent was celebrated by the bulls with their resounding bellows; the calves frisked about in glee; the cows shone with a new triumphant glow; the trees shot forth new buds in their thrill of joy. There was a universal rejoicing at Krishna's miraculous achievement. The assemblage complimented Nanda on his son's victory and assured him of lasting bliss. Yasoda hugged her darling close to her bosom and fondly enquired as to how he managed to wriggle out of the coils of the huge serpent and how he felt while in his grip. She kissed his cheeks, fondled with his curly forelocks, and drenched him with her tears of joy.

Kaleeya is a typical representative of vicious braggarts, who in the prime of youth over-rate their capabilities and in their foolish pride hurl defiance at those who are infinitely superior to them in strength and power. Suffering ignominious drubbing at the hands of their opponents, they sneak to places of safety, places to which their enemies' access is forbidden under pain of death. They cover their cowardice and past humiliation with the exercise of power in a tyrannical way over weaker and humbler folk and derive satisfaction from vicarious vengeance. When meanness, cowardice, hurt pride and frustrated ambition combine, there is no end to the resulting wickedness and wilful destruction. Oivine intercession

alone can bring about redemption and establish peace and security.

Kaliya episode provides an object lesson to spiritual aspirants as to what happens if they suppress their knowledge of higher values, and stray into devious ways of attractive sense-pleasures and pollute the climate of natural, healthy and noble life. It is to be noted that Kaliya is not lacking in true knowledge; he has the capacity of introspection; he is aware of God's existence and is familiar with higher moral and spiritual values. But greed and self-aggrandisement bring him into conflict with Garuda. He makes good his escape to a lake, access to which is forbidden for his enemy under a curse. There he suppresses his knowledge and allows it to hibernate. He projects his looks outside into external nature and gives full rein to his senses to revel in their pleasures; his sense of security from peril accentuates his lust for domination. Power swells his heads, corrupts his mind and warps his body into manifold crooked coils. He infects the very source of sustenance (*jala water*) with the venom (*visha*) of sensual indulgence and even spreads environmental pollution which spells danger to all living creatures. He exercises unchallenged sway till the Supreme (*Krishna*) presents Himself, stamps on his outspread hoods in a vigorous dance and knocks out his arrogance. The knowledge lying dormant in him all along is rudely awakened with the resounding *Pranava* emerging from the Lord's feet as they tread upon him. Kaliya is humbled; he repents for his folly; he surrenders and craves for pardon. His wives and retinue join him in supplication; and the Lord graciously grants him life and liberty. It is up to those who hanker after spiritual life to keep themselves ever alert in avoiding the tempting pulls of worldly pleasures, and ever alive to the need of preserving the treasure of spiritual experiences in burnished brightness.

Scholars draw a refreshing lesson from this episode of Kaleeya mardana. Krishna stamps the hundred hoods of Kaliya with his nimble feet with vigour and brings about his utter humiliation, even a near collapse. They see in this a reference

to the 101 centres in the column of spiritual consciousness (*naadeemandala*) with its base in the pelvic region (*moolaadhaara*) and summit in the cranium (*sahasraara*). The aspirant strives to direct consciousness (*chaitanya*) through these channels by yogic exercises; and, in the process, demolishes these centres and reaches, through *Sushumna naadi*, the ultimate centre in *Sahasraara*; and there he finds the Supreme waiting for him to effect his final release (*moksha*). Kaleeya's hundred hoods are the centres of spiritual consciousness which have been vitiated with his arrogance and wickedness. They have become purified of their dross by the impact of the Lord's feat and have attuned themselves to the flow of spiritual consciousness. The Lord grants Kaleeya life and liberty; and the latter becomes penitent and promises to turn a new leaf and channelise his activities towards universal happiness and prayerful devotion to the Lord. Thus Kaleeya is brought to the penultimate stage of spiritual advancement with Krishna's stamping of his hoods; he has only to prove himself worthy in his new life to be taken to the final stage of redemption (*moksha*).

Ravana's death at Rama's hands provides an interesting parallel study. Rama strikes Ravana's head; another sprouts in its place; he eliminates it; a third appears in succession; and the process goes on till the toll of heads rolled reaches one hundred. The fall of the heads may be deemed to be the demolition of the centres of *naadimandala*. Then Rama employs *Brahmaastra*, the most potent weapon composed of the elemental effulgence and endowed with the speed of wind and the blaze of fire; and it strikes off the last surviving head of Ravana and he falls dead. *Brahmaastra* may be considered to be the Supreme Himself in all His might and power, forcing His entry into His adversary's *sushumna* and affecting his final redemption (*moksha*). A glowing light emerges from Ravana's corpse and enters into Rama, indicating how even persistent hostility of a tenacious reprobate has earned for him re-entry into the all-forgiving Supreme Divinity.

The assemblage of gopas and gopikas who turned out in large numbers in search of Krishna now felt related with

his miraculous triumph over Kaliya. The strain of suspense and anxiety which finally culminated in exhilaration at the boy's victory led the people and the cattle to relax themselves on the banks of Kalindi for the night. Half-way through the night, they were rudely awakened by the appearance of a blazing forest-fire. The frightened people set up a howl as the flames spouting sparks and fumes surrounded them; they turned to Krishna with a prayer that they be saved from the conflagration. They expressed their strong conviction that those who reposed their confidence in him as their only saviour would be emancipated from all difficulties and dangers without any doubt. Taking kindly to all those devotees of his, Krishna showed his immeasurable strength and prowess by opening his mouth wide and swallowing the forest-fire in a single draught. Hallelujas of victory filled the sky and reverberated by all quarters. Balarama and Krishna and all their kith and kin, their companions, their cattle, returned to Brindavana in a jovial mood.



IV - 22. THE PLAY OF SEASONS

IV - 22 - (i) Summer Sports and Pralambaasura

Summer in its intensity set in; the rays of the sun caused great discomfort by their excessive heat; but Brindavana, owing to the presence of Krishna and Balarama, continued to enjoy the sweets of an extended spring. The gopa boys, under the lead of the brothers, had a pleasant time as they tended their cattle in the woods; they engaged themselves in various sports and pastimes and amusements; they exchanged pleasanties; they sang and danced varying their tunes and their rhythms; they evinced interest in exhibiting their skills in

wrestling and boxing. They formed rival teams and competed with one another for honours in their games. Balarama and Krishna were their leaders who directed their activities with their natural gusto and authority. While the boys were engrossed in their activities, a rakshasa by name Pralamba, sneaked into their company assuming the form of a gopa, with his heart bent on working mischief among them. Krishna's alert eye noticed the sly entry of the stranger into the crowd. Who could escape the all-seeing Lord's detection? But with an apparent unconcern, Krishna invited him to join in their sport and showed him the utmost friendliness.

Krishna made a proposal that all his companions should form into two groups and compete in striking their targets with stones and raw fruits and take a count of the hits to determine the victors. Krishna was at the head of one team and Balarama led the other. The top-scorers of both sides should be carried in triumph on the backs of the vanquished. During this competition, Krishna found occasion to whisper into his brother's ear the nature and intentions of the intruding stranger and told him to take charge of him. A gopa by name Srinama took Krishna on his back; Bhadrasena offered his back to Vrishabha; Balarama chose Pralamba for his mount. The Rakshasa was happy to have an opportunity to do away with one of the brothers, little knowing that Balarama was a match to Krishna in strength and prowess. Pralamba flew into the air with the precious load on his back, to the consternation of all the spectators. Balarama was no ordinary boy to be trifled with. He grew in weight, became as heavy as a mountain-summit; the speed of flight was automatically checked. The pseudo-gopa turned into his original form of a terrible demon and appeared like a huge dark cloud with Balarama adhering to him as a flash of lightning. Balarama noticed for the first time the frightening Rakshasa with his massive limbs, his blazing red-shot eyes, his sharp protruding canines and bejewelled crown and ornamented chest and wondered at his uncontrolled inbred arrogance. This sight did not unnerve him. Rather, it provoked his ire and he wished that the demon should have a taste of the strength of his supposed victim. He closed his fist and began

dealing hard blows on the demon's head in quick succession. The battery proved effective; Pralamba's head split into pieces and blood gushed out; he raved and fell to the ground like the mountain-summit struck by Indra's thunderbolt. Krishna and his companions rejoiced in Balarama's great victory and acclaimed his achievement. The gopa elders embraced him and blessed him, while the celestials rained flowers on him in appreciation of his help in eliminating one of their most feared enemies.

It would be interesting to recall to mind how on an earlier occasion the demon Trinavarta came raging like a fierce whirlwind and whisked away the child Krishna into the sky. The divine child throttled his throat with his hefty hands and dragged him down to the earth by his sheer weight and put an end to him. Trinavarta's aggressive virulence and contemptuous estimate of the child's strength proved to be self-destructive and ended in his ignominious death. Pralamba's approach was different; he practised deception and passed for one of the gopa boys by mixing with them on easy familiar terms. Krishna who detected his fraud, deliberately left him to be tackled by Balarama, if only to prove to the world that his brother was no less divine in prowess and competence to handle demons. Pralamba behaved as a friend only to betray the confidence reposed in him; and instead of limiting his run with Balarama for rider to the confines of the sport, he took off into air, resumed his original demoniac form and attempted to do away with him. But fraud and trickery, giantliness and wickedness, failed to unnerve the divine boy and met with disaster at his hands. Krishna wound his hands round Trinavarta's throat, throttled him and hung heavily from his neck to drag him down to death. Balarama, on the other hand, pounded his enemy's head with the hammer-blows of his fist and split it to cracks which emitted blood. Fraud deserved a crushing blow and Balarama administered it with resounding success.

Some take Pralambasura to represent the massive overhanging pile of sin accumulated during numerous births (*Sanchitapaapam*). It is incumbent upon people aspiring for spiritual life to refrain from adding to it and even try to destroy

it and thus check the perpetuation of the chain of birth-death-rebirth etc. (*Samsaara*). But this is a task which they cannot accomplish by themselves. Moved by commiseration for them, the Lord Himself, or an emissary specially commissioned by Him, effects the total liquidation of the overhanging pile of sin. Balarama, at the instance of Krishna, smashes Pralambasura and secures redemption for the devotees of Nandavraja.

IV - 22 - (ii) **Wild Wood-Fire** (*daavaanalam*) :

As the gopas were about to collect the cattle and wend their way homewards, they scented from afar the emergence of wild wood-fire. They briskly turned the cattle away from the direction of the fire; Krishna supplemented their efforts by calling the cattle by their pet names and they responded with a remarkable alacrity. Still, the fire seemed to take wing and spread over large domains with undiminished rage; and the gopas prayed to Krishna to save them from the fast approaching conflagration. They pleaded with him that as they were his kith and kin and as they confided in him as their sole refuge, he should graciously avert the impending danger. Krishna exhorted them to close their eyes; collected the fire in his outstretched palm and swallowed it with perfect relish, as though he was drinking a delicious beverage. The gopas expressed surprise at a mere human boy extinguishing a flourishing fire and concluded that Krishna must have been an incarnation of Brahma or Siva or Vishnu who came on purpose to be their saviour. At the confines of the village, they blew their flutes and sounded their horns to announce their arrival. The gopa women, to whom even moments of separation from Krishna appeared to be aeons, felt an uncontainable ecstasy on seeing their beloved companion. The gopa boys related to their kith and kin the glorious miracles wrought by Balarama and Krishna that day in the woods. The whole village was agog with excitement and pleasure and gratitude; and felt that it was a privilege to have such boys of miraculous might as residents therein.

IV - 22 (iii) **The Monsoon** :

The sun's rays sucked in vapours from the sea in summer and stored them in the clouds. The monsoon set in. Now they

emptied their contents on the earth, slaking her thirst and drenching her parched seams and layers. The showers cheered the hearts of the farmers and they ploughed the soil and sowed the seed, with hopes of raising bumper harvests. The peacocks danced in ecstasy, spreading their tails in majestic array. The rivulets sped down the mountain-sides, pooled their resources and rushed forward in spate over the plains towards the sea, eager to lose their identity in the coveted embrace of their lord. The earth covered herself with a carpet of emerald green grass, thus providing plentiful feed for cattle. In this season, Krishna presented the vision of magnetic charm; his body was a huge sapphire cloud; his gentle, amiable smile was a lightning flash; his flute-sound was a deep sonorous thunder; his peacock-feather turban was an attractive rainbow (*Indradhanus*); his gentle nectarine looks were showers of spontaneous grace and mercy, relieving the hearts of the devotees (*the Chataka birds*) of their stress and agony. Krishna observed, along with the residents of the village, the prescribed rites and ceremonies, worshipped the Deity presiding over the season, the Guardian of the bulls, cows and calves.

IV - 22 - (iv) Autumn (*Sarat*) and the music of the Flute.

As the wheel of time rotated, the monsoon retarded yielding place to autumn (*Sarat*). The earth began to dry; the rivers lost their speed and spate; the ecstatic cries of peacocks were heard no more; thunder and lightning made themselves scarce; the skies were clear as crystal; the stars regained their glow; the moon filled the earth with her mellow, refreshing light. This time of the year was marked by the celebration of worship of the goddesses of arts and learning (*Saraswati*) and of wealth and affluence (*Lakshmi*) and of victory and glory (*Sakti : Durga*). Krishna was impressed with the sobriety of the season. He stood amidst his companions with his right foot across the left, with his head leaning to the left shoulder, with his ear-studs reflecting their glow on his blooming cheeks, with his arched eye-brows sheltering a magnetic cheer; with his purple silk dress, peacock head-gear and lotus-flower garland radiating light and spreading

fragrance. He applied his pipe to his coral lips and playing on the stops breathed heavenly music. Captivated by its melodious rhapsodies, the gopika women came out of their houses, gathered in small groups, and called out the sluggards still within the houses, to join them and enjoy the sight of the divine Krishna before them, playing upon his flute. The women were so engrossed in love that they cherished embracing his feet within their minds. Words failed to describe the entrancing sight before them. They feasted their eyes by gazing intently on him; they reckoned their ears blessed for eagerly drinking in his music. Some of the forward women went to the extent of blaming him for denying them the taste of the nectar of his netherlip and for giving a monopoly of that bliss to the piece of bamboo, which had the exceptional luck of becoming his flute. How great must have been the penance of that bamboo to receive this exhilarating reward! Their thoughts rambled thus: Was it not strange that the waters of the lake, stirred to their depths by the musical rhapsody, exhibited their joy through the dance of the lotus-blooms emerging from their bosom? Moved by the melodies, the trees around spilt drops of honey from their flower-cups, in the same way as spiritual aspirants shed tears of joy when they were face to face with a staunch devotee of God. How instructive would it be if the pipe revealed the secret which contributed to its success in reaching Krishna's lips? How full of bliss the response of the peacocks, which deemed Krishna to be a cloud and his music its rumbling murmur! What a fascinating sight of celestial damsels who, overwhelmed by the strains of Krishna's flute during their aerial rambles, lost control over themselves and fell on the bosoms of their husbands! How was it that the denizens of the woods, the deer and the stags, by nature devoid of all sense of music, gave up nibbling and lost themselves absorbed in Krishna's lilting strains! How surprising that the calves suddenly stopped sucking milk from their mothers and raised their heads on hearing the music and stood staring at Krishna wonder-stricken!

As the notes of the flute struck the ears, the cows stopped grazing, raised their heads, and, with Krishna's feet set in their hearts, drank in the melody through wide-open ears and stood rooted to the ground—pictures of absolutely attuned admiration. The birds of the air, perching on the branches of trees, became ravished with the music of the pipe, closed their eyes, and got absorbed in meditating upon the form of Krishna, like seasoned devotees of ripe spiritual experience. The rivers themselves could not exercise restraint over their flow, on hearing Krishna's music, but extended their arms, collected flower-blossoms and through their billows offered them at his feet; and then only could they find gratification. How wonderful ! The sky chastened itself by raining showers on Krishna; and becoming cloudless donned a garment of pure white. The simple tribal belles, clad in leaves, decked him in garlands of wild-flowers, placed fresh juicy fruits in his hands and clasping him giggled and danced in glee. Thus the whole universe felt the spell of Krishna's pipe-music and fell into a trance of all-absorbing joy ! Awakening from it, the congregation raised a paean of grateful praise and glorification. Brindavana acquired the halo and the sanctity of the City of Bliss, even because it bore the footprints of Krishna, the Incarnation of the Supreme Lord.

IV - 22 - (v) Winter (Hemanta) :

Days became shorter; nights gained in duration; the northwind raged; the moon became an intolerable enemy; the mountains lay hidden under thick sheets of snow. As blasts of cold wind flourished, the people shivered and sought comfort in warm woollens. Unable to confront his enemy, the sun took fright and fled to the western horizon with all the speed at his command. The dark bees sucking the honey from the Chengalva flowers seemed like a smoke-screen over the fires ignited by Cupid (*Manmatha*). The three fires (*Tretaagnis*) confessed their incompetence to face their enemy and took refuge, one in the depths of the sea (*Badabaagni*), another in the forehead of Siva (*Pralayaagni*) and the third in the stomachs of human beings (*Jattharaagni*). Even the Trimurtis felt that they could not resist the fury of Hemanta

except by losing themselves in the embrace of their respective consorts. When Hari felt a shiver along his spine on Hemanta's severe assault, Lakshmi offered protection and comfort by hugging him to her bosom. The only way of escape from Winter's onslaught was to seek haven in Cupid's sport !



IV - 23. GOPIKA VASTRAPAHARANA

It was during winter, the uncongenial season of discomfort that the young, blooming maidens of Nanda's village, entered upon the performance of certain ceremonial rites connected with the worship of Katyayini, the Deity presiding over marital relationship and conjugal bliss. The rites began with the sun entering the Dhanus constellation and extended over a month. In conformity with the prescribed procedure, the maidens bestirred themselves before dawn, proceeded to the river Kalindi for a purificatory bath, raised an idol of the Deity with clay near the water-margin, and worshipped her sprinkled flowers, wafted scented frankincense, presented little lamps of oil-wicks, burnt camphor, and made offerings of various dishes of food and fruits. After rendering this service, they raised a common prayer to the Deity and implored her blessing in uniting them with Krishna in marriage. They made an advance commitment that, when their wish was graciously granted, they would celebrate the consummation with a ceremonial festival of offerings to her of innumerable pots of butter and ghee.

As usual, the gopikas rose early and called out their friends by their pet names and collecting into a group proceeded to the river at a majestic pace, singing, all the way, the praises of their beloved lord. Though all of them had their hearts set on Krishna, it was strange that mutual jealousy was completely absent. On the other hand, they seemed to

evinced a common interest and could not bear the thought of leaving any one behind. Such was their solicitude for one another. One day, in the course of their observance of this religious exercise, they had to face a piquant situation. After reaching the bank of the river, they discarded their clothes at a lonely spot, thinking that there was nothing wrong in doing so; they entered the river with pure hearts and made sport with one another in the waters during the bath; they entertained the company in chorus or by turns *in solo*, with singing the praises of Krishna. They were completely absorbed in their diversion. Krishna appeared on the scene with a few of his companions. He cautioned them to stay where they were and keep mum; he moved with stealthy steps, hiding behind shrubs; he crawled on all fours unseen by others till he reached the spot where the maidens left their clothes. Collecting the garments in a swoop, the mischievous lad summoned his companions with a smile to share the fun; and with steady majestic pace he reached a neem tree and climbed it with the precious stolen burden.

The scared maidens saw what had happened. They made a piteous appeal to Krishna: "Beloved one, do not touch our clothes; pray, pardon us, do not carry them off; why do you expose us to dishonour? Desist from it. It is up to you to protect the people with a lion's majesty and save the world from danger; it is proper for you to exhibit your prowess to bring rival princes to book; it is meet that you distinguish yourself by upright conduct, by executing the preceptor's command, by impressing the learned and the virtuous with the dignity of an adult. Is there any greatness in indulging in mischief? Should you not be considerate to your own kith and kin? Do not delay returning our garments. We have lost our hearts to you; you have stolen our minds. Will that not do? You now deprive us of our sense of shame by carrying off our clothes. We now see to what extremes of mischief you can go. We know, after seeing your miracles, that you are the very source of vigorous activity; we are aware that you are the fountain of unruffled propriety, even when you make assault on others; we are

conscious of your great powers of body and mind, as you devise plans of retribution, of bringing others to book; we understand from your impulsive freaks your ever-changing mysterious ways of conduct. It is not possible to conjecture where you belong, nor to estimate what you possess, nor to size you up by any particular attribute. There is not a moment when you can stay steady at any place. You do as you please with a royal abandon, even as there is none to exercise authority over you. We are women and we deserve considerate treatment. We pray that you will be pleased to give us our clothes."

Krishna listened to their pathetic appeal, with his hands locked in his companions' and with a genial mischievous smile playing on his lips. He replied that women would not address kings to get their matters settled, in the way they did, openly accusing them, without thinking about the committal of their own lapses. But he offered to give them their garments if they came out of the waters and claimed them. The gopika maidens looked at one another, smiled at his shrewd words but felt shy to act up to his suggestion. Harassed by the chill wind and standing in neck-deep waters, the village belles renewed their appeal: "Dear lord, how could you, of all persons, stealthily march away with our garments? You are the one who strictly follows the code of righteousness. You are no ignoramus, nor are you a light-hearted rustic. Do men go to the spot where women take their bath? Even if they should by chance go there, will they indulge in such heartless improprieties as this? Have we ever heard of such harassment anywhere in the world? It is only an aberration peculiar to you that has prompted you to put us into trouble. We shall go to you whenever you call us; we shall proceed to any place at your behest; we shall give you whatever you want from us; we shall attend on you and abide in your service. Only, do show mercy and return our garments." A broad smile brightened Krishna's visage as he questioned the maidens, with apparent innocence, who the lover they set their hearts upon could be. He wondered who could be that young man whom they fancied to marry by observing this rite. He urged

them to speak out as he was no stranger but one close to them. The maidens looked at one another; they experienced the same pangs of love for the Prince Charming before them; they smiled and remained tongue-tied in shyness. Krishna understood their embarrassment; he assured them that if they would, as promised, agree to be his servitors and carry out his commands, he would return their apparel as soon as they emerged from the waters and claimed them. This announcement was followed by a general consultation among the gopikas; some brave lasses fell in with his proposal; some were willing to come out but were bothered by shyness; some others hesitated to act, lest they should thereby cause embarrassment to Krishna; the others passed through mental agony and remained indecisive. After wrangling for a time, they came to a final decision to emerge from the river, even because the chill wind served to accentuate the need for covering their nakedness. They stood before the little boy, Krishna, with the plucky girls in the front row and the others sulking behind them, and with their left hand hiding their private parts. Krishna saw that they did not overcome their sense of shame and were making a futile attempt to protect their honour. It was time that he should give them a frank talk : "O beautiful damsels ! I have grown with you from my infancy; I have been *with* you and *within* you. There is nothing that is held back from me, no secret that I have not beheld. Why then all this shyness before me ? You have all vowed to observe strictly this religious ritual. You have committed a lapse by entering the river without clothes on. By deviating from one of the principles of this exercise by taking the bath naked, you have nullified the effect of the rite. If you wish that this ritual should yield the desired result, you have to raise both the hands and join them in supplication for pardon for your lapse." The demsels would not countenance non-fulfilment of their eager desire by any lapse on their part in the observance of the *vrata*; and so they lifted their hands over their heads and joined them, imploring pardon. They could not understand that they were in the presence of One, the mere thought of whom sanctified all rites and set right all the shortcomings in their observance. Krishna was pleased and returned their garments. The gopikas sang his praises; he had

stolen their apparel; he had released them from their shyness; he had made fun of them; true, but he had also saved their ritual from getting flawed by inducing them to lift their hands in prayer to the deity. The actions of the lovers appear laudable to the beloved ones, even when they indulge in heckling, in lies and derisive laughter, in words which smart and cause pain. That this assessment is correct was borne out when the gopikas stood silent before Krishna, clad in their attractive dress, their eyes resting on him without a wink, their minds dedicated to him in intense love. When hearts are full, words usually fail or falter. Krishna himself declared his understanding of the situation in which the gopikas found themselves. "Worthy damsels, your modesty prevents you from exposing your secret longings. You have lost your hearts to me and wished to serve me as your lord, I speak the truth; your rite is sure to yield the desired result. By this worship of Ambika, you will enjoy worldly pleasures; you can rejoice in my company during nights; you will by your devoted service earn release from the chain of birth-and-death. Trust in me and you will fare well." The gopikas now were beside themselves with joy that their religious rite yielded the desired fruit, and wended their way homewards with hearts set firmly on the feet of the Lord.

This episode of *Gopika vastrapaharāṇa* bristles with controversies, some branding Krishna's conduct as heinous and others defending his behaviour as proper and blameless. Let us take note that Krishna is a lad of seven at the time of this occurrence. It is preposterous to ascribe carnal proclivities to him at such a tender age. His carrying off the robes of the bathing gopikas may, at the worst, be regarded as an innocent sport or diversion or amusement; or, at best, as a manoeuvre to draw out their intense longing to marry him. In playing this frolic, the aim, superficially, is to poke fun at his beloved gopikas; the real purpose, however, is to secure for them the fulfilment of their long-cherished wish of getting united with him. It is far from his mind to expose them to shame; for to disgrace them is to dishonour himself. The gopikas have unknowingly (be it granted) violated an essential principle

in the observance of the ritual of Katyayini worship by entering the river naked for bath. They have exposed their bodies while shedding their clothes on the bank; it is true that they have sighted none in the vicinity and so have deemed the spot a lonely one. But they will have to come back to the bank, equally exposed, after their bath and remain so till they cover themselves with their garments. What Krishna has demanded of them is nothing more than what they will have done in the usual course. If the gopikas have found the spot no longer lonely, but peopled with Krishna and some lads, they have to thank themselves for their lack of foresight in divesting themselves of their clothes. After all, the river is a public resort and is not out of bounds for other bathers of either sex. There is thus no justification for the gopikas blaming Krishna for the situation they have led themselves into by their own folly. Is not Krishna indulging in an act of indecency in walking off with their raiment? No, even because women observe no privacy before lads of his tender age; and Krishna as well as the gopikas repeatedly iterate that they have known one another so closely that there is nothing that they have to hide; there is nothing that is not exposed already. The lasses do not at all complain that their modesty is outraged by Krishna's mischievous prank. They only feel shy that they are coerced to acknowledge their folly in public and make amends for it by seeking pardon with uplifted hands joined together in supplication. The thought that they are, after all, exposing themselves only before their admired and adored lover brings them comfort; and the assurance given by him that they have earned the reward of their rite and will have his company during nights takes them to ecstatic heights. It may here be noted that when the devotee faces the Deity he should stand naked; that is, he should expose fully his mind and heart; he knows that nothing could be hidden from the Lord's all-seeing eye. Such frank exposure of what he is—with his merits and lapses—wins the love of the gracious Lord and culminates in his redemption. Again, it is worthwhile recalling to mind that carnal desires cannot tolerate sharing of lover's attentions; but jealousy is singularly absent from the hearts of the gopikas.

All of them are in love with Krishna; all of them are eager that none of them should be denied a share in the common happiness; all of them wish to have Krishna for their husband and enjoy the prerogative of serving him for ever and ever. Such a longing is impossible to come across in the mundane world, Krishna has captivated the hearts of thousands of damsels and by his ubiquitous presence has given them, individually, the bliss of his enchanting company. Consider how fair is the froward critic who brands him a philanderer, much worse, a profligate? Krishna is the Supreme Lord, the Spouse Divine; the gopikas are the spiritual aspirants hankering after the ineffable bliss of union with Him. The ruse of snatching away the clothes of the gopikas is adopted by Krishna to make explicit this esoteric erotic relationship (*Madhuraḥbhakti*) between the Spouse Divine and the struggling souls, pining for His love.

Now for a digression, or what looks like it, but is not altogether irrelevant. Krishna manages, at a very tender age, to make thousands of gopikas *feel* that their erotic longings are fully satisfied. As a mature adult, too, he manipulates his manoeuvres with such skilful mastery that his eight queens feel equally delighted in having their aspirations fulfilled in a measure which is beyond their fondest imagination. Nārada, the divine minstrel, entertains a doubt as to how Krishna is able to create such climate of harmony among his wives who have different temperaments and egoistic predilections. In his investigation, he discovers that Krishna is found entertaining *all* his queens with his charming company and sweet talk *at the same time* and giving them an *equal share* of happiness. Another point for consideration. Does it not look odd that the eight queens are called "Mahishis"? 'Mahishi' means 'a she-buffalo'; and how does this epithet sound complimentary when applied to women of royal descent, entrancing beauty and refined demeanour? And Rukmini, who shares the throne with Krishna is the Queen-Eminent (*pattamahishi*)! No, no; this approach is evidently ludicrous. 'Mahishi' signifies 'Sakti' — massive strength, vigorous vitality and irresistible power; and scholars say that there are eight manifestations of that Sakti; and that

the eight queens of Krishna are replicas of that Phenomenon. And as Krishna Himself is the Supreme Person, he keeps them always in good humour, without appearing to hold sway over them, and thus stifles discord and promotes harmony to prevail. And even the magnetic, majestic, imperious, self-willed Satya-bhama, with all her nagging zeal to monopolise her lord's loving attentions, succumbs willingly to his sly devices of toning down her soaring desires, in order to obviate disturbance to domestic felicity. Each of his queens is the proud mother of worthy offspring. And yet, strange that Krishna has gained the appellation of a Bachelor, pure and undefiled by even a stray ejaculation (*askhalita Brahmachaari*)! Evidently, he has, by his mysterious power (*maayaasakti*), seen to it that the desires of the Queens are promptly satiated, in the same way as the wishes of the gopikas are satisfied, *without his personal involvement*. With them to entertain a wish is to realise its fulfilment at that very moment; and that is because Krishna's grace acts instantaneously to bring it about. How can the humans ever conceive the mysterious designs and miraculous workings of the Supreme Intelligence? And Krishna is *no incarnation* of God: he is Lord Vishnu Himself and he openly declares himself that he is Bhagavan!



IV- 24. ANGIRASA SACRIFICIAL RITES

The young gopikas left for their village in a mood of ecstasy as the Katyayanivrata yielded the desired fruit; and they were assured of union with their lover, Krishna.

Krishna, Balarama and their companions went deep into the woods tending the grazing cattle. As the day progressed and the rays of the sun became intolerably hot, the boys had to repair for shelter to the shades of the trees having broad umbrella-like leaves. They expressed their appreciation of the

selfless service rendered by trees as benefactors of all living creatures. They did no harm to any one; on the other hand, they provided refuge from heat, cold and rain; they bestowed a lavish feast of fragrance and honey from their flowers and nourishing and refreshing juices from their ripe fruits — without entertaining any wish for reward or return. Such selfless benignity and universal benevolence could be associated with only the trees as their unique characteristic. The gopas led their cattle to the river Yamuna, where they slaked their thirst. The boys approached Krishna, told him how famished they were and how badly they needed to be fed. Krishna informed them that several Brahmins who wished to attain celestial status and happiness were engaged in a sacrificial rite known as Angirasa Sattra Yaga and that the venue of the rite was close by. He directed them to approach the Brahmins and inform them that Krishna and Balarama who were exhausted with tending cattle, sent them with a request that they might be supplied with food. The boys did as they were instructed; they reminded the Brahmins how on such occasions they would usually invite wayfarers to partake of their offerings; and now that they came at the instance of Krishna and on his behalf, the performers of the rite should have no hesitation to providing them with food. But the Brahmins, crass-minded and hard-hearted, rebuffed the boys with a stiff refusal, deeming Krishna to be no better than a mere gopa boy. The disappointed boys returned to Krishna and reported the failure of their effort. Then their leader suggested to them to revisit the venue, avoid the men, and make a direct approach to the wives of the Brahmins and seek their favour. On hearing that Krishna was in the vicinity and was feeling the pangs of hunger, the ladies could not resist their curiosity and eager longing for his *darsan* and their solicitous urge to feed him. How can man understand the child's need? It is only the mother who suckles the child at her breast and gives it her vital essence that can appreciate the keenness of the pangs of child's hunger and the urgency of eliminating them by providing adequate sustenance. Filling the pots with the various courses of diet, rice and wheat preparations, pickles, sweets and savouries, fruits and juices, the ladies hastened to the place where Krishna was staying. The

menfolk—their husbands, brothers and sons — made a valiant but futile attempt to obstruct them. The devout Brahmin ladies had an unforgettable vision of the glorious divine boy : there, in the shade of the Asoka tree near the river-margin, stood the enchanting Krishna, resting one hand on the shoulder of a companion and stretching the other wafting a lotus in a graceful way; stray, lustrous, curly locks framed the forehead and danced on his cheeks; a shining purple silk was tightened about his waist with flowing plaits to the fore; a creamy turban sporting peacock feathers was wound around the head; a sparkling garland of aromatic leaves and fragrant flowers adorned his chest. The women, who brought him refreshments, were dazed for a moment; then they fixed their looks on his magnificent form; they drank in his beauty with passionate love and admiration; not content with that experience, they transfixed that fascinating picture of the lord in their hearts and held it in a warm embrace, as that alone appeared to be a panacea to all the ills of the world. Krishna noticed their devotion and solicitude for him. He enquired about their well-being and the affluence of their homes and requested them to return to their husbands and help them complete their sacrificial rite. But the ladies were upset deeming his words as a sharp rebuke; they were reluctant to get back. They defied their menfolk earlier and reached his presence; they pleaded with him to allow them to stay with him as his servitors; for, they would find no welcome at their homes after all that had happened. But Krishna assured them : "Dear ladies, take it from me, your menfolk would not feel annoyed at your being with me; even the celestials will praise you for your stay with me. It is foolish to think that physical contact with me yields happiness to humans; it is the union of spirits that ensures ineffable bliss. It is only by visioning me, hearing of me, meditating upon me, singing in praise of me, that you will be released of your physical forms and secure liberation and attain me. Believe me and all will be well with you." It was said that those who gave alms to others in a spirit of offering them to the Lord would reach the land of the blessed — Paramapada. Here were the Brahmin women who made food offerings to the Lord Himself. Who could divine what reward they would earn

for their humanitarian-divine service? The Brahmins learnt that their wives became blessed by extending hospitality to Krishna and his companions. They blamed themselves that they were heartless ignoramuses grovelling in sin, who distanced themselves from the Lord by regarding Krishna as a mere human child. Of what use was their mastery over Vedic lore and knowledge of the Sastras? In which way did their penances and ritual exercises, their exacting spiritual discipline and exemplary ethical conduct help them? Without any of these qualifications and equipment, their women, by their transparent innocence and simple but ardent faith, developed a high degree of perception and recognised the Lord in Krishna. They keenly regretted that their own fickleness, waywardness and lack of devotion clouded their judgment; and they were caught in the net of illusion that Krishna was a common child and were unaware that he was the Lord who incarnated to rescue the world from the forces of evil. They made ample amends by repenting for their lapse and craved for his pardon; fear of Kamsa prevented them from meeting Krishna; from where they stood, they offered salutations to the Saviour of the worlds and Destroyer of all perpetrators of evil.

This episode brings home to us the lesson that Vedic learning and Sastreic scholarship, rigorous penance and spiritual exercise will not avail, will not yield fruit, *unless* they are illumined with strong faith, ardent devotion, and intuitive perception. The men had the burdensome equipment and failed; the women had the innate faith and devotion, the essential qualities, and succeeded in attaining their goal, in reaching the Footstool of the Lord. To make a discrimination against women and disqualifying them for studies of Vedas and Sastras and spiritual disciplines etc., is patently unwarranted. Instances are not wanting of women of yore proving themselves more than a match to men in these spheres of activity. By their very nature and constitution the sexes have their own merits and weaknesses and limitations. To claim that men are superior to women is nothing but aggressive male chauvinism; to argue that women are superior to men presents the reverse picture, an equally untenable female chauvinism. The sexes

are not warring contestants; they are equals complementing and fulfilling each other in working for a harmonious pattern of life. Vying with each other, a healthy competition as witnessed in every branch of activity in modern times, will bring about the best in each other, to serve the good of all : emulation, not envy; compromise, not confrontation; between the sexes is the crying need of the hour; to honour such a perceptive understanding is to ensure a harmonious and progressive way of life both for the individual members and for the society as a whole.



IV - 25. GOVARDHANODDHARANAM

Nanda and other gopa elders contemplated the performance of the annual rite to invoke Indra's blessings for the perpetuation of their prosperity. In that context, they wanted to consult Krishna and seek his counsel. Krishna joined his raised hands in salutation to the Yadava King and his councillors and enquired : "Dear father, pray, tell me what fruit does the performance of this rite yield, who could be the Dispenser of the reward, who could be the person authorised to perform the rite; what should be the material and accessories needed for its observance; and whether this particular rite is prescribed by the Sastras or observed as a traditional exercise. These particulars may be withheld from enemies; but they may be freely disclosed and discussed among friends and well-wishers. Rites performed with full knowledge of their nature and efficacy are sure to fulfil the desires of the performers. For people like you who maintain an equable temper, there is no friend, no foe; all the more reason why you can express your thoughts freely, without any reservation."

In reply to this enquiry, Nanda expatiates upon the origin, history and significance of the rite they have been

observing scrupulously for years. "Listen, O Beloved One ! Parjanya, a potent lieutenant of Indra, is in command of the clouds; and at the instance of the lord of the celestials, he orders the clouds to disgorge themselves of their contents; and torrential rains fill the earth with water to the delight of all living creatures. The earth, thus soaked, nourishes vast meadows with luscious grass and breeds rich harvests of food-grains, thus providing feed for cattle and sustenance for people. Kings make it a point to propitiate Indra by the performance of these rites and win his goodwill for universal benefit. Where cows flourish, milk and milk-products abound in plenty, the people wax strong by consuming them and the celestials feel delighted with the offerings made to them. Woe unto the kings who deflect from this course of propitiatory observance !"

Krishna was all attention during Nanda's recountal. Indra developed hauteur presuming that he had no equal in strength and prowess, in affluence and power. Krishna was not happy with him; he wished to teach him a lesson and make him realise that there is a Supreme Lord to whom he owed his status as chief of the celestials. He wished to annoy him by the non-observance of the rite, provoke his ire and then frustrate his authority and bring him to his senses. With this purpose in view, he put forward an alternate proposal as more proper and more beneficial. "Dear Sire, the force that governs life from birth to death and during all its vicissitudes is Karma; it is the cause of all joys and sorrows experienced during life-time; none, not even Parameswara, can deflect the course it ordains. Where then is the need to fear Indra ? The celestials and the Rakshasas as well as all the human beings, are bound by the prescriptions of Karma; and there is no escape from this limitation. Karma is man's goddess; he lives under her dictates; to flout her and render service to another amounts to an act of desecration. The Brahmin is to devote himself to the performance of rites prescribed by the Vedas; the Kshatriya is to engage himself with the governance of the country; the Vaisya is to occupy himself with agricultural and commercial operations and the Sudra is to dedicate himself to the service of

those in superior vocations. The three fundamental characteristics (*Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*) govern generation, growth and decline of all living creatures. The world is created by *rajoguna*, the life-force; under its instigation clouds release torrential rains; nourished by these showers, the earth yields rich harvests; well-fed humans help forward the procreative course and bring about the perpetuation of the race. Indra does not figure anywhere in this process. There is no reason why Indra should get offended; even if he gets angry, why should we feel concerned? Do we have kingdoms or cities or mansions or commercial establishments to apprehend their destruction by him? After all, we live in cottages, in woods, on mountain-sides and occupy ourselves with tending cattle. In which way are we under obligation to Indra and why need we fear his wrath? It is more appropriate that all the materials, intended for the ritual to please Indra, be utilised for the worship of this mountain, Govardhanagiri; that all the offerings like milk-pudding and sweet pan-cakes be made to it in the sacrificial altars; that all culinary preparations of rice, pulses, vegetables, and flavoured fluids be distributed among the people; that Brahmins who conduct the ceremonial functions be honoured with gifts of cows and cash and clothes; that humble outcasts (*Chandalas*) and low creatures (*dogs*) be sumptuously fed; that a feast of adequate fodder be provided to the cattle. It is but meet that all the gopa community in all their numbers, join in the festivities and participate in the worship of the Mountain, in felicitating the cows, in honouring the Brahmins. This is how I view the situation; and it is for you, O father, and other revered elders to decide whether this proposal conforms to dharma, the ethical code, and is worthy of acceptance." Nanda and his companions fell in with the proposal with ready enthusiasm. Whatever proposal emanated from Krishna was acclaimed as absolutely right, eminently feasible, and abundantly fruitful. Accordingly, the gopas made a departure from the usual practice, made their offerings to the Mountain and honoured the Brahmins who conducted the ceremonial worship and paid devout attentions to the cattle by giving them sumptuous feed and adorning them with floral garlands and with gold coverings for their horns.

It is important to note how Krishna manipulated and managed the whole ceremonial. He appeared to all the people of Nandavraja as his usual self; at the same time, he assumed the shape of the Mountain; he was with them as a participant in worship; at the same time, he received the offerings in his manifestation as the Mountain. He told the gathering that the Mountain could assume any shape at will; that it could cause trouble to the evil-minded; that it was considerate towards them and was graciously pleased to accept their offerings. After due worship, the assemblage with Krishna at the head and the cattle to the fore, and accompanied by the Brahmins who recited Vedic benedictions, circumambulated the Mountain in all reverence. Nanda and other dignitaries got into their chariots yoked to bulls, which were not inferior to steeds of noble breed in strength and speed, for an exhilarating ride around the Mountain. The gopa ladies, who followed them in their carriages, displayed their musical talents and sang hymns in praise of Krishna as the mighty destroyer of enemies. Cows with shining hides of variegated tints, with udders and teats filled to the brim with milk, moved with a majestic gait providing a veritable feast to the eye. Close upon their heels, marched a sturdy herd of massive, mountain-like bulls, with huge humps and vigorous uplifted tails, shaking heaven and earth with their reverberating bellows. The spectacular procession wended its way round the mountain and then proceeded to the village.

Indra came to know how the gopas ignored and slighted him by their deviation from the long-established practice of worshipping him. He flew into rage, summoned the terrible clouds which wrought devastation at the time of Dissolution, and addressed them in words of burning indignation : "Look ! these cowherds have grown fat on curds and ghee and in their arrogance treat as naught the wielder of the thunderbolt, who made devastating sport with winged mountains and put them to disgrace. See how reckless they are; encouraged by Krishna, they give up the ceremonial worship of me; and, instead, make their offerings to this mountain. They have foolishly chosen, for their guide, an immature boy, a rambler among woods and mountains, a person devoid of noble heritage, social status,

steady virtue and upright character. They have relinquished the well-established observance of adoring the celestial lords and set at naught the path prescribed for spiritual aspirants to get purified and finally to gain redemption from the chain of birth-and-death; and, instead, they have taken recourse to the mean worship of coarse material objects to realise their worldly ambitions. Relying on their affluence and misled by Krishna's specious argument and counsel, the gopa community has adopted a suicidal course. They must realise their folly in straying away from my worship. Now listen ! I command you to display all your terrible might of devastation, overwhelm the people and their cattle in the maze of your lightning flashes, harass them with your reverberating thunder and crush them to death by a heavy, stifling downpour of hail-stones. Show no quarter; be merciless; flourish in all your magnificence and fury. I shall be presently with you, riding on my terrible mount, Iraavata, and attended by all the celestial hosts and help you in inflicting severe chastisement on the reprobates." The clouds carried out their master's orders instantaneously. They formed into groups and spread over the sky like a thick dark sheet; emptied their contents in unbroken torrential rain, pelted heavy hail and rumbling thunder. The ups and downs of earth lost their identity and appeared level under cover of rain-water fathoms-deep; the calves, blinded by the ceaseless flashes of lightning, crashed into fainting fits; coming behind them, the cows with their ear-drums shattered by the terrible unbroken roar of thunder, reverberating from all quarters, reached a stage of utter collapse; the sturdy bulls bringing up the rear, harassed by hail-stones and unceasing heavy downpour, had lost their nerve, bent their heads, and shaken with fear bellowed piteously for shelter; then followed the gopas, who were in charge of cattle, thoroughly exhausted under the battering of the violent storm and driven to the extremes of despair; bevvies of village belles in helpless disarray arrived with faltering steps, shivering all over under the chill blasts, and moaningly called upon Krishna to rescue them from their sad plight; then, the mothers in utter fright with their babes closely nestled to their bosoms came out in extreme perplexity as to where they should go to find refuge. The gopa elders, who were unnerved and

shaken out of their wits after they witnessed the vast devastation of their village, hastened to the presence of Krishna and prayed to him to save them from frightful ruin. "See you not what havoc has been wrought by this hail-storm? In all our lives, we have not come across such a devastating horror as this cyclone. How dreadful these lightning flashes, how deafening this booming thunder, how terrible this splattering hail, how horrible this heavy downpour of rain! The whole village is flooded; all of us are in the grip of extreme panic. You know that we have pinned our faith on you as our sole Saviour. Is it fair that you watch our sad plight with unconcern? We offer our salutations to you and pray for immediate protection. We entreat you to bestir yourself and save us from this impending disaster." Krishna's heart melted with sympathy for his devotees. He was aware of the tragedy that had overtaken his folk. He knew that all this havoc was the retaliatory vengeance wreaked by Indra in his uncontrollable rage, provoked by the gopas giving up the usual sacrificial rites to his honour. Krishna cogitated for a while as to what remedial course he should adopt. The celestials, as a whole lot, held him in reverence as the Supreme Lord and so did not merit punishment. It was only Indra who, mad with affluence and power as the king of the celestial regions, had chosen to react with such wild wickedness in his rage that the Yadavas had by-passed the sacrificial rite in his honour. The ends of justice could be met by adopting a course that would put Indra to disgrace and make him realise his folly. But the crying need of the moment was to save his people from the impending catastrophe, Krishna hailed them all (the elders and the youth, the women and the maidens, the boys and the children, the bulls, cows and calves) not to get disheartened and assured them that the merciful Lord would not leave them unprotected. In His incarnation as the White Boar (*Yajna Varaaha*), He lifted the Earth from the fathomless depths of the ocean; and now in His incarnation as Krishna, He scooped up the mountain Govardhana from its base with ease, lifted it and resting it on his left palm held it as an umbrella and invited the harassed folk and cattle to take shelter under it. He declared at the top of his voice: "Do not entertain any doubt whether this little

boy can stand the strain of keeping aloft this huge mountain for long; be assured that my hand will not shake a bit, even if the entire globe with all its mountains and seas and woods and living creatures impinges on the uplifted mountain. I invite you, one and all, to take cover under it with all your cattle; shed your fear and be cheerful. I guarantee your safety." To the onlookers the child's act might appear to be a miraculous achievement; but it is a trifle for One who flings, in sport, massive globes of the universe, like bouquets of flowers. The inhabitants of the village put faith in Krishna's assuring words and rushed into the vast space, under the uplifted mountain-base, with their cattle and other belongings. They were unaware of hunger and thirst under the impact of the nectarine looks of their saviour; and they entertained themselves with a cheerful recountal of his miraculous deeds and lively pranks. With Krishna's left hand as the sustaining rod, with the mountain summit as the top-end of the handle, with the sparkling pearls in the ornaments of gopikas as the drops of rain sliding at the edges, with the bright smiles and the radiant side-glances of gopikas as the clusters of diamonds in mountain layers, the umbrella, Govardhanagiri, shone in the fulness of all its splendour. The mountain was like a radiant lotus-blossom in the hands of the lotus-eyed lord; and over it crowded the clouds, like bees swarming over the blooming flower. Indra, in his overweening pride, presumed to shatter the protecting mountain-cover and prolonged the barrage continuously for seven days and nights without respite. The uplifted mountain bore his wrath without quailing; Krishna's supporting hand remained steady, unshaken; the lord of the celestials was crest-fallen with the utter futility of his arrogant onslaught. He collected his army of exhausted clouds and retreated home, thoroughly beaten and sorely humiliated. The fierce gales stopped blowing; rain and hail ceased ingloriously; rivers in spate subsided into normal flow; the sun came out once again brightening the clear sky. The threatened catastrophe made room for peaceful orderly life. Krishna exhorted his kinsfolk to clear out of their shelter at once with their cattle and belongings. After making sure that none lingered behind, Krishna gently deposited the mountain in its original place. The gopa

elders hugged him, complimented him on his great service to the community and blessed him; the women sprinkled flowers on him, and fed him with curds and rice; Nanda, Yasoda, Rohini and Balabhadra clasped him in warm embrace and pronounced benediction on him. Siddhas and Saadhyas rained flowers on him; Gandharvas sang and danced in joy; Suras blew conchs and beat drums in ecstasy; Tumbura and other divine minstrels raised paeans of praise for him. The gopas, as a whole community, approached Nanda, expressed their wonder at Krishna's daring exploits and miraculous achievements and, recounting them in the order of their occurrence, declared that he was no human being at all; that he should be a divine incarnation. Nanda assured them that they were right and that from what Rishi Garg told him earlier he came to the conclusion that Krishna was an incarnation of Vishnu, the Lord Protector of the worlds.

It was the turn of Indra, the lord of the three worlds, to realise his folly in arrogantly assuming a posture of hostility to Krishna, under the false impression that he was a mere human child. He could now see that he was the Supreme Lord, as none else could have lifted up the mountain and given protection to the gopa community and their cattle wealth. Shorn of his egoistic pride, he hastened to Krishna with Kaamadhenu (the celestial cow), prostrated before him and joining his hands in salutation craved for his pardon for his misdemeanour : "Lord, Your abode is ever illuminated with *Sattva* and *Santi* (solemnity and peace); it is eternal and free from *rajas* and *tamas* (restless activity and woeful sloth); a climate of penance and spiritual discipline prevails there; worldly features associated with Desire, Anger, Greed, Attachment, Arrogance and Jealousy, find no admission into that land of bliss. You are without attributes (*gunarahita*); You are the Supreme Lord of the Universe : its Creator, Sustainer and Ordainer. It is only to protect the virtuous and to punish the wicked that You handle the sceptre and incarnate in the world, for its great good. You have justly punished me for my supererogation of power; and I eminently deserve that humiliation. Fools like me forget that our authority as rulers is limited; in our obdurate pride, we

believe that we are all-powerful and recognise no superior. Not knowing the magnitude of Your strength and the magnificence of Your power, and piqued by the non-observance by the gopas of the usual sacrificial rites to my honour, I have wrought this devastation over their land. I confess my guilt and implore Your pardon. Even Brahma and other dignitaries fail to understand the mystery and the glory of Your sportive pastimes. A massive ignoramus, a reckless ruler with supercilious air of arrogance bred by consciousness of power over three worlds, a trifler of virtues like humility and renunciation, a consummate contriver of unwholesome designs — how can I visualise Your magnificent strength and power? I can only pray for pardon and mercy.” Krishna smiles; he is indulgent to any one who owns his fault and seeks forgiveness: “Lord of the celestials! Affluence and power have gone to your head and made you blind to your higher obligations. It is to bring you to your senses that I have purposely prompted the gopas to deny you the honour of their annual offerings. I wish to save those who forget the Source of their affluence and the Mainstay of their power, by depriving them of these very things which have made them arrogant. Now that you come chastened, you may continue to enjoy your sovereignty. Be alert; never again slide into arrogance; and good will attend on you.”

Look at the magnanimity of the Lord! Indra is guilty of a grave crime; he has attempted to destroy the entire community of the gopas and their only means of livelihood, their cattle-wealth — for the simple reason that they have neglected to observe a ceremonial ritual to his honour. Is their lapse so serious as to merit wholesale ruin? But Krishna's intervention has averted the disaster perpetrated by Indra. Even the direst punishment will not be commensurate with the heinous crime committed by Indra. But the Lord is so generous that He leaves him scot free — with no punishment at all; He administers a gentle rebuke, no doubt; but lets him off with a warning to behave better and not to get mad with pelf and power. Does this treatment square with the ends of justice? Let us go a little deep into the matter. Nanda and his folk will have, in the normal course, performed the rite and made offerings to Indra,

It is Krishna, who has advised them to give it up; and instead, make worship to the Mountain. The gopas have suffered the consequences of this departure from custom; and Krishna who is responsible for it discharges his obligation and saves them from Indra's wrath. Indra fails; humbles himself and seeks Krishna's pardon. Krishna's purpose in this whole design is to knock arrogance out of Indra's mind by showing him his place and how powerless he is before the Supreme Sovereign personified in him. That purpose is fulfilled when Indra repents for his folly and falls prostrate before him. Krishna has regarded Indra's monstrous assault as an exhibition of a frustrated child's peevish temper. What does a mother do when a child gets into a nasty mood and flings stones at her and the other children? She does not return the charge; she takes steps to protect herself and her other children. After a time the perverse child gets tired of his own violence, cools down and gets reconciled to his mother. Krishna here treats Indra as a froward child, who has unfortunately yielded himself to a temporary aberration. Punishment, as is well-known, is intended to correct an erring person; and when that end is achieved, there is no need to prolong it. Any further chastisement amounts to wreaking vengeance. After all is said and done, Indra is a staunch devotee of Hari. Whenever he lapses into folly, he is brought to book. *To mend the errant people is the aim of punishment, and not to end them.* The Lord is a Fountain of Mercy; There is no limit to the showering of His grace !

Govardhanoddharanam led to the installation of Krishna as 'Govinda'. Kamadhenu now stepped forward; she made her humble obeisance to Krishna and expressed her gratitude to him for the protection he gave the entire cattle species and for the eternal bliss he showered on them. She declared that he was their god and saviour and would remain so for ever; that he was an incarnation of Hari, who had come on purpose to free the world of evil; that his presence would ensure the happiness of cows and their progeny, of the pious Brahmins, of the spiritual aspirants and of the celestials as well; and that Brahma thought it meet that Krishna should be installed in the same way as Indra was, and commissioned

her and other celestial denizens to bring it about. Purandara was very happy to have the honour of performing this auspicious ceremony of installation. Surabhi rained potfuls of milk; Iravata spouted through his proboscis jets of Ganga water; the mother of the celestials, Aditi, graced the occasion with her presence; Purandara accompanied by the great rishis, sages and saints, completed the rite and gave Krishna the title of "Govinda". This announcement met with universal applause. Krishna himself felt proud to be addressed by this new appellation. To be known as the lord and protector of cows and cowherds was a compliment that he cherished more than any other title. There was jubilation all round; Narada and Tumbura led the chorus of praise, as Siddhas, Chaaranaas and the Gandharvas followed them; the celestial hordes rained flowers; the charming damsels danced in joy; the milch-cows emptied their udders; rivers flowed with fresh limpid waters; mountains glowed with the radiance of diamonds; trees and creepers abounded in flowers and fruits; living creatures gave up their natural hostility and moved in amity. The installation of Krishna as "Govinda" was thus an occasion for universal rejoicing; and for the gopa community and the cow-species it was an unforgettable ecstatic festival.



IV - 26. RELEASE OF NANDA

After observing fast on Ekadasi day, Nanda entered the waters of Yamuna for an early bath, not knowing that the hour he had chosen for it was not auspicious; it was a part of the night when Daityas flourished. A *daitya* availed himself of this opportunity and carried him off to the kingdom of Varuna. The gopas became agitated when they found Nanda missing and brought the mishap to Krishna's notice. Krishna visualised how his father was abducted to Varuna's domain; and he hastened to get there to effect his father's rescue. Varuna welcomed him

with all the honours due to a revered guest and made a humble submission : "O Madhava, how gracious of you that you should, of your own accord, bless me with your visit! By your generous gesture, my house is purified, my mind is chastened, my aspirations are fulfilled, my soul is filled with inexpressible joy. That mysterious power, *Maaya*, which holds the universe in its mighty grip meekly submits to your authority and takes orders from you as a dependant and servitor. To such a Supreme Person, the Protector of the righteous and the Refuge of the penitent, I offer my humble salutations. In bringing your father here, my servant has, unknowingly, committed a grave offence; I apologise for it and seek your pardon. You know that I am a loyal servant of yours; pray, forgive me." Krishna was moved; he condoned his lapse; and returned home with the released Nanda.

Nanda related the story of his release from Varuna's captivity; the entire community rejoiced in his home-coming and praised Krishna as the Supreme Lord, who had chosen to live amidst them as their Protector, Sustainer and Benefactor. Krishna, who divined the orientation of their minds and their workings, wished to give them a glimpse of the real world of spirit and of its hallowed experiences. To people, who were engrossed with worldly pursuits with varying degrees of success and failure, the domain of spiritual bliss would be an El Dorado, beyond the reach of the highest flights of their imagination. Krishna decided that his devotees, the inhabitants of Nandavraja, should have the privilege of immersion in the lake of spiritual experience (*Brahmahrada*). He therefore distanced himself from the mysterious cover of *maaya*, shed his form and attributes, turned into a steady bright Light (*jyoti*) of Truth (*Satya*), Knowledge (*Chit*) and Bliss (*Aananda*) and all-pervasive Existence (*Brahma*). Lo and behold ! To the gopas was disclosed the eternal world of ineffable bliss, admission to which was restricted to sages and saints after they were cleansed of sins and released from the grip of the three fundamental qualities of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Nanda and his people wondered at this glorious vision, and experienced an unknown ecstasy. They joined their hands in salutation and worshipped Krishna as

the Supreme, the Lord of the enlightened Yogis of blissful experience.



IV - 27. DAY-TIME A HELL FOR WOMEN

Dusk was the harbinger of hope and joy for the gopa women. Krishna would return with his companions from the woods along with the cattle. As the sun reached the western horizon, as the faint shades of darkness descended on the earth, as the dust raised by the hooves of returning cattle cast a mantle overhead, the women got excited with joy that their lover and lord had arrived; and they marched towards him to welcome him home. The nights took them into Elysian heights in the company of Krishna. They found fault with Brahma for alternating day with night; he would have done well if he had established a prolonged night without any break; but such wisdom was not to be associated with one so fully preoccupied with the problems and processes of creation ! Dawn tolled the death-knell for romance, love, fun and merriment; for, Krishna would leave for the woods with the cattle. Separation from him created hell for them. It was unbearable; away from him, every minute appeared to be an hour, every hour a day, every day a fortnight, every fortnight a month, every month a year and every year a whole epoch — such was the intensity of the agony of isolation. The only way of escape from this torment was to recall to mind, and dwell upon, the sweet experiences enjoyed in his company at night; and to exercise the faculty of imagination and weave fanciful pictures of happy moments with him in the future. The gopa women's infatuation for Krishna could not be measured. How entrancing were his face and features, when he stood leaning his head to the left and applied his flute to his lips and deftly played upon the stops with his delicate fingers to produce cascades of heavenly music ! Even the celestial ladies would be so charmed by the creator of the

melody that they would forget for the moment their lords who were by their side. The cows and the calves disregarded food as something trivial and stayed away from grazing; and raising their heads listened to the strains with rapt attention and evident pleasure. The peacocks looked at Krishna as he played on his instrument; they deemed him to be a dark rumbling cloud and began an exciting dance to express their joy. Krishna's presence, Krishna's music, had a universal appeal. His absence from the village during day-time spelt misery for the gopa women; and his return by night brought cheer into their hearts.

It is said that what is day to worldlings becomes a night for spiritual aspirants who are engaged in exercises of discipline, and *vice versa*. The day-time is spent in worldly pursuits and the yogis are not interested in them; and so they stay away from them and take rest. The common people exhaust themselves with their chores during day and relax at night. The yogis find excellent use for the nights; they are active in their spiritual endeavours as they find the tranquil nights congenial to the purpose. The gopikas are the devotees of the Lord; they are not interested in mundane life and so the days make them cheerless. They rejoice in the nights in the company of the Lord whom they love and hanker after. Krishna's music throws a spell on all those who are oriented towards him — to whatsoever species they belong — and transports them to the land of bliss.



IV - 28. ROMANCE BY MOONLIGHT

IV - 28 - I. Sarat :

As the cycle of seasons rotates, *Sarat* makes its appearance, 'infecting' the nights with romance; the sky devoid of clouds brightens with the mellow beams of the moon; the

pleasant climate is congenial to the sport of Cupid. Flights of Chakora birds rejoice in moving about in their element, feeding on moon-beams; the tulips in the lakes bloom forth in an expansive smile. The moon in *Sarat* is a potent shaft in Cupid's armoury; a welcome stimulant for the Chakravaka mating; an honoured guest for the married couples; and gall and wormwood to bachelors and spinsters. As the lord of the night takes his rise as a smooth radiant globe, he seems to have caressed his beloved, the Eastern Horizon (*Praaksati*); and her blushes impart a red glow to the entire surroundings. He shines like the gold pot on the ceremonial umbrella of the chariot of Cupid, who makes an assault on the hordes of lovers; he glows like the disc in the hand of the destroyer of Sambara (*Sambaraantaka*) when he smashes asunder the strong bands of restraint shielding the lovers; he blazes like a pile of live-coals commissioned by Maara to reduce to ashes all forests of honour, which are inimical to sensual enjoyment; he glows like a mellow bewitching lamp in Madana's hunt for the deer of love-lorn women. The emergence of the full moon, filling the world with exhilarating radiance, puts Krishna in mind of the charming Lakshmi with her lotus-face sporting the bright vermilion mark on her forehead. The season and the situation, the still night, the smooth flow of the clear waters, the woods bathed in white moonlight, have a strong impact on Krishna; he applies his flute to his lips and breathes out a song, filling the world with its melody; and thus he enhances the wizardly magnificence of the scene.

IV - 28 - 2. The call :

The strains of music float on the air; the gentle zephyr wafts them to Nanda's village; their effect on the gopa women is intense and instantaneous. The enchanting song has a mesmerising effect on them; their only interest now is to quickly repair to the woods near Yamuna and meet Krishna, the producer of that ravishing melody. They are so totally engrossed with thoughts of him that nothing else matters for them. They have to switch off at once from domestic chores in which they are engaged at the moment; there is no question of completing them. They give up releasing calves to have

their feed at the cows' udders; they stop milking the cows; they do not care to boil the milk collected in pots; they leave the pots on the oven even after the milk is boiled; they fail to serve the hot milk to their children; they suddenly cease attending upon their husbands; they break off eating half-way through; they stop midway in dressing their hair. They give up decorating their eyes with collyrium; they suddenly check themselves from smearing their bosoms with sandal paste. They move out of their houses, as people possessed; they brook no obstacles; they brush aside their annoyed husbands, brothers and other close kith and kin. Assailed by the incessant barrage of Cupid's bolts, they have lost control over themselves; they find no peace until they meet their beloved Lord. Like lightning flashes breaking loose from collections of clouds, they have shot out of their house-prisons with a hilarious, carefree abandon. Such then is the potency of Krishna's summons, which brooks no resistance and no delay, and which provokes immediate compliance.

It is worth reflecting on the nature and efficacy of the call. Krishna's flute, like Rama's bow, represents *Pranava*; the sound emerging from it proclaims *Omkaara*; A (ॐ) suggests the nature of the Lord (*Paramaatma*) as the Primal Cause (*Kaarana*) and Protector (*Rakshaka*) and Ordainer (*Niyaamaka*) of the universe; M (म्) represents the individual self (*Jivaatma*) as the child and possession (*sottu*) of the Master; and U (ॐ) constitutes the inseparable link between the two, the mediator, Lakshmi or Preceptor. The individual self cannot withstand the Effulgence of the Lord directly; the preceptor absorbs the dazzling light, as the moon does the sun's rays, and reflects them in a mellow form towards the disciple. It is this illuminating message that the flute conveys through its melodious strains. The summons is clear to the gopikas. He has already carried away their hearts; they now renounce their earthly connections—parents, husbands, children, kith and kin, cattle and other possessions — and hasten to meet their Lord and Lover. This sense of affinity to Him (*raaga*) breaks the darkness of ignorance, like the red tinge on the horizon which banishes night and announces the advent of dawn.

Yet, there are a few who are unable to check out of their houses; they too have lost their hearts to Krishna; they have endured the pangs of separation; but have consoled themselves by enjoying union with him in their minds. This psychological at-one-ment with him has broken the bonds imposed by body (*sareera*) and the three fundamental qualities (*satva rajas tamogunamulu*), and secured salvation (*mukti*) for them. There is no surprise in this attainment; for, even his enemies bent on doing him harm, like Sisupaala, have gained admission into *Paramapada* by the mere touch of his weapon. When such is the case, how can those honoured with the embrace of the Incarnation of Hari fail to get into the land of bliss? It is well-said that those who give themselves up to Hari, whatever be the means of approach, are sure to earn this eternal happiness. To attain Him, different means are employed : cultivating devotion (*bhakti*), vowing vengeance (*paga*), seeking relief from suffering (*vaga*), making love (*preeti*), claiming kinship (*baandhavam*), soliciting protection out of fear for life (*praanabheeti*) or any of the other forms of absolute submission or surrender. The motivations and the paths may vary, but the destination is the same.

IV - 28 - 3. The response and the reaction :

Krishna surveys the multitudes of gopikas who have ventured out to meet him in the woods on hearing the melody of his flute. He is the shining jewel among the virtuous; he is an adept manipulator of words appropriate to the occasion : he addresses the assemblage of women before him : "Look, dear ladies, how dare you leave the village at this part of the night and come over to the woods, infested as they are with wild animals like lions, tigers and elephants? Have you spared a thought for your people, how anxious they will be for your safety? Your mothers and fathers, your husbands and in-laws, your sons and preceptors, your brothers and kith and kin, must have, out of their solicitous concern, searched every nook and corner and felt extremely miserable not finding you, Have you considered how audacious it is on your part to desert your homes? Is it proper to defy your in-laws, to put your husbands to shame, to dishonour your brothers and disgrace your parents and to expose yourselves to the derision of kith

and kin ? How will the people react when virtuous housewives run away from their homes at dead of night ? Have you reflected for a moment what consequences your impulsive act brings in its wake ? Your lives come into peril when your husbands come to know of your misbehaviour : your fathers-in-law hasten to break off your marital ties; your parents hang their heads in shame; your sons treat you with indifference; your kith and kin indulge in light-hearted comments; the bailiff takes you to task and the ruler metes out punishment. No, there is no happiness in this venture of yours, as it compounds fear of discovery and loss of name. Hence is it laid down in our ancient ethical Code (*Dharma*) that it is honourable for a woman to cling to her husband, even if he be ugly or ignorant or weak or ill or immoral. Look ! these are the woods adjoining the river Yamuna in their fascinating beauty; your minds must have strayed to fetch you here. Return to your homes, take care of the crying children, release the hungry calves to have their feed at their mothers' udders; last, but not the least, attend upon your husbands with care and devotion. I do appreciate that your longing for me has urged you to go here braving all risks; I am pleased. But I do not lack company. Are not all living creatures equally dear to me ? To attain fulfilment of your desire, it is enough if you retain me in your thoughts, and rejoice in seeing me, and in hearing and singing about me and in meditating on me. Well, honourable ladies, it is not meet that you should tarry here any longer. Hasten back to your husbands and homes !"

The gopa women have heard his lengthy homily on lofty ideals and exemplary behaviour. They are sorely disappointed and distressed with his stiff attitude and cruel rejection of their love. They present a heart-rending picture of abject misery. Insistent exhalations of fiery breath turn their coral lips white; a profuse flow of hot tears tinged with collyrium darken their fair bosoms; the burning heat of the palms pressing their cheeks fades the bloom on their faces; an unending barrage of Cupid's shafts shatters their fortitude and makes them pathetic. Intense grief overpowers them; their lover's unkind words strike them with panic. They fall prostrate at his feet, make a

doleful moan and appeal to him with faltering words : "Alas ! We have put our entire trust in you and have hastened here to offer worship at your feet, renouncing home and all its affiliates. It is up to you to show consideration to us of the weaker sex and take us under your protection, in the same way as the merciful Lord who offers refuge to spiritual aspirants seeking release from *samsaara*. Do not reject us; let no thought that you are cruel disturb our minds. You have pronounced judgment that women are under obligation to observe correct relations with their husbands, children and kith and kin. Good. You shine before us under various appellations as *naatha* (husband), as *prabhu* (lord), as *putra* (son) and so on. Now, tell us how it is wrong on our part if we address you severally by these very names and have our desires in the various capacities fulfilled. You are the eternal stimulator of passionate love; and the adepts in the art find bliss in union with you. While our great desires and hopes entwine you, why do you raise before us painful memories of our mundane relationship with our husbands and sons ? O Fountain of mercy ! We pray that you will kindly rid us of the terrible agony caused by Cupid's villainy. Permit us to declare, with all the emphasis at our command, how totally we are committed to you in love and service. Having brought us close to your footstool, our feet refuse to carry us back; having touched your lotus arms, our hands decline to handle other chores; having listened to your nectarine words, our ears pay no heed to any other talk; having drunk in the beauty of your form, our eyes take no interest in looking at other objects; our tongues sing your praises and find nothing else worthy of utterance. Why have you stolen our minds and hearts ? Is it fair now for you to tell us that you will have nothing to do with us ? We are lost ! What are we to do in this helpless plight ? Listen to our firm resolution. We *will not* turn away from your lotus-feet, which we have managed to reach at long last, as a result of some past penance to our credit. There is no question of our returning home; we owe no allegiance to our husbands. Do the bees which have tasted the fragrant honey from lotus-blossoms care to approach other flowers ? Charmed by your genial smiles and sweet words, and harassed by the stinging arrows of Cupid, we have

come here, ignoring the sharp rebukes of our parents-in-law and flinging our staring husbands into grief. We are averse to any *rapprochement* with them. Pray, do save us by making us your servitors. Are there not instances of women in the past succumbing to the charms of their lovers? Have not the lovers welcomed them with open arms? Why then do you raise this deedless row and expose us to this unendurable torture? It will redound to your glory if you effect our rescue with your loving embrace. Is it possible for any woman to escape the darts of Cupid after having a glimpse of your comely face, blooming cheeks brightened by the glow of diamond ear-studs, curly locks of hair playing on your forehead, smooth coral nether-lip radiant with nectar, and soft smiling bewitching looks? How can we survive if you do not deign to listen to our wail? If we are to escape this torment of passion, you have to honour us with a loving hug and sprinkle nectarine drops on our lips, dress plaits of our hair with fragrant blossoms, cast your charming glances on our countenances and feast our ears with your lively talk. When trees and animals, birds and cattle, feel Charmed when they see you or hear your song, does it look odd if we, humans, women and weaker vessels, melt and get lost? We can extinguish the fire of passion only by a heavy, down-pour of your refreshing words; we can cross this deep ocean of agony only with the help of the boat of your gracious looks; we can dissipate this dark gloom of depression only with the aid of the mellow light of your smiles; we can suppress this raging fever of passion only with the miracle drug of your nether-lip's nectar. You have come to us on purpose to alleviate the agony and eliminate the anguish of the residents of Vrepalle.

Unless you extend your whole-hearted co-operation, how can we manage to meet this cruel assault of Manmatha? How unkind are you? You do not deign to look at us; you do not care to open your mouth. Alas! We are on the point of collapse. We plead for mercy. We are in your hands. Dispose us as you wish". Krishna's heart melts at their pathetic condition. He smiles. He is the lord of the yogis; and by employing his yogic powers he gives them the joy of his

company and stills the pangs of their suffering. The gopa women attain fulfilment of all their wishes in the sport of love with their enchanting lover, Krishna. It is necessary to remember that the devotion of gopikas is not stained by the influence of the three fundamental qualities (*Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*); there is nothing physical about it; it spurts naturally and spontaneously without any cause or motivation (*Kaarana*), without any sense of duty or obligation (*Kartavya*), without any expectation of reward or benefit (*prayojana*). It is sweet, inseparable soul-kinship (*madhura prema*) which is true (*satyam*) and eternal (*nityam*) and unexcelled by any other type of love. They know that Krishna is the quintessence of perfect universal love (*rasaswaroopa*) and that he rains love on all (*rasaprada*); and so they surrender, without any reservation, their all — body, mind, heart and soul — to his keeping and become receptacles of his overflowing grace and thus attain ambrosial bliss (*aananda*).

IV - 28 - (4) The Quest :

While the hundreds of gopa women pay their loving attentions to him, Krishna gives them the slip and makes himself scarce. The damsels are so greatly absorbed in thoughts of Krishna and of the pleasures in his company that they become mad when they miss him. They cannot bear separation from him; they make a thorough search for him. They go about questioning every plant whether it has noticed Krishna anywhere; and in so doing associate some quality of Krishna with it. They fondly dwell on the attractive features of their lord so that they may serve as marks of identification. Addressing the jasmine shrubs, they enquire whether a dark boy with lotus-eyes and compassionate looks, with a radiant smiling face and a head-gear sporting peacock feathers, who has carried off the honour of women, has found shelter behind them. In a similar strain they address other plants and creepers, dwelling upon one or another outstanding characteristic of Krishna and seek their aid in tracing him. That the gopikas are aware of the Lord's vital presence as taste (*rasa*) in fruits and fragrance (*gandha*) in flowers establishes the relevance of their inquiry. It cannot be dismissed as fantasy, as a flight of mad fancy. The

gopikas compliment the Earth (*Bhoodevi*) for her great good fortune in having close association with Hari for aeons ; Hari has saved her and embraced her in His incarnation as White Boar (*Sweta Varaaha*). He has covered and occupied her with a single pace as *Vaamana*; He has left His footprints on her as Krishna. They enquire her as to what penance she has made to attain this bliss. The gopa women, in their distraction, have lost their individual identity and getting absorbed in Krishna's personality indulge in imitating his miraculous deeds. As one damsel plays the part of Pootana, another takes Krishna's role and sucks her milk; as a third cries in hunger and kicks a fourth who plays the Cart (*Sakataasura*). In a similar way, the scenes of Krishna's daring exploits are enacted ; the elimination of *Trinavarta*, *Bakasura* etc. Some others among the women replay the pranks and miracles of Krishna : stealing butter, disclosing the whole universe to Yasoda in his mouth, dancing on the hoods of Kaliya, lifting the mountain *Govardhana* to protect the community and their belongings and cattle, consuming the wild wood-fire etc. The gopa women have lost their individualities and become identified with Krishna — a great achievement indeed, this at-one-ness of the human spouse with the Divine Spouse, of the individual self (*Jeevaatma*) with the Supreme Soul (*Paramaatma*), of the aspiring devotee with the gracious Deity.

In this eager quest for Krishna, the gopa women find his footprints and draw inferences about his activities : "Krishna must have plucked flowers here; see how his toes make a deep impression on the soil. There is no trace of woman's footprints here; he must have carried her on his shoulder. Look there, impressions are left of two persons sitting together; Krishna must have adorned the tresses of his beloved with bunches of flowers. Here the lady's foot-prints show that she has raised her heels; it is clear that she has received the lover's kiss. They must have enjoyed love-sport at this spot; see how it bears the pressure of bodies swaying sideways. Here are traces of man and woman facing close to each other; there you see male foot-prints followed closely by female foot-prints — an indication of a woman pursuing him; in this spot

there are male footprints flanked by female footprints on either side — a clear proof of two ladies competing to claim his attention. The sacred feet of Krishna are no other than those sought after by yogis like Sanaka, Sananda and others; they are to be found lit with effulgence in the prescribed styles of Vedic recital; the hallowed daughter of the Sea of Milk (Lakshmi) clings to those very feet for strength and sustenance; aspirants for release from *samsara* struggle towards attaining those bewitching feet alone. Brahma and other celestial lords feel privileged to sanctify their heads with a sprinkling of the dust off the very same feet." These remarks prove that the gopikas are aware of the identity of Krishna with Hari; and it is this recognition that makes them sore in separation from him. They relate to one another their own sweet experiences in love-sport with him and sing his praises, if only to divert themselves from the disappointment caused by their failure to trace him. There is no trace of envy in any one of them of their comrades sharing similar joyous experiences in Krishna's company. On the other hand, they rejoice that every embrace of his glorifies their breasts by illuminating their knowledge (*Jnana*) of him and accentuating their devotion (*bhakti*) for him. At the same time, the impression he receives, with every hug, of the dainty vermilion paint on his chest, enhances his beauty and mellows his love and makes him all the more admirable. It may here be recalled that the Alvars, like the gopikas, approach the Lord with the passionate excitement of the love-lorn women and crave for His delicious embrace as an ambrosial consummation of their agonising quest. The damsels assemble on an extensive sand-dune near the river and make a persistent entreaty that Krishna should *disclose* himself. They have realised from experience the futility of attempts to *find* him; they now pray that he should pity them and *reveal* himself to them. To this end, they set up a paeon of glorification of his charming features and shining attributes. It is said that those who engage themselves in such laudatory exercise equal in merit those who dispense gifts on a munificent scale.

IV - 28 - (5) The Final Appeal :

“O Beloved one, it is because of your birth in our community that Lakshmi accentuated our prosperity; do not withhold your presence; give us life by appearing amidst us. You have enslaved us by your charming looks; and you now withdraw deserting us. Does it not amount to killing us? You have graciously saved us from grave perils — from poison-bearing demoness (*Putana*), from the venom-filled waters (*Kaleeya*), from terrible hail-storm (*caused by Indra*), from the all-consuming wild-fire (*Daavaanalam*); and now, you mercilessly kill us by exposing us to the painful flower-shafts of Cupid (*Manmatha*). Is it fair? Who believes that you are the child of Yasoda? We know that you are the Supreme Lord who have chosen to take birth in our community, with this magnificently alluring form and fascinating features, to rescue the world from the grip of the demoniac forces and thus discharge a commitment made to that effect to Brahma. May your hand, which waves away all fear of entanglement in *samsara*, cycle of birth and death, for devotees who surrender at your feet, may your hand which bestows, in abundance, material gifts on worldly-minded seekers, be stretched over our heads to confer, without stint, life eternal on us! May your hallowed feet, which gently trek behind the cattle in all simplicity, which cleanse the penitent of their piles of sins in all purity, which stamp the arrogant hoods of the wicked and venomous serpent in all powerfulness, be placed on our bosoms in all their refreshing coolness to alleviate the suffering caused by Cupid’s burning bolts! You display your grit and firmness, your strength and prowess before us, feeble women and loyal servitors! Does this square with your reputation as one who chases fear from your supplicants? Stories of your life, your encounters, exploits and miracles, glow with auspiciousness, destroy base desires, provide nectarine nourishment, to those engaged in penance, and draw high encomiums from reputed yogis like Sanaka. How can those who lack generosity and benevolence relish and appreciate their essential value? We have lived with you! Your looks and your smiles, your sportive pranks, your witty words and jokes, have all been stored in our minds; and they refuse

to be dislodged now. We feel much perturbed in mind, when you go into the woods tending cattle, that your delicate, soft, lotus-feet may wilt by impact with hard stones. But when you return home at dusk, with your face drenched with drops of sweat and your curly tresses covered with dust raised by cattle" hooves, we behold a new vision of your beauty which ravishes our hearts. When you are away in the woods, minutes appear like aeons for us as we are denied the sight of your charming face. How hard is Brahma that he prevents us from having a full view of your enticing features at least during nights by obstructing vision with eye-lids ? Entranced by the melodious strains of your flute, we have raced to your presence, setting aside the remonstrance of the dear and near in our families. Alas ! of what use is our infatuation for you ? You are unkind; and you keep yourself away from us. Know from us that we have treasured in our hearts your form and features. But to be in your immediate presence is to experience a thrill that is unforgettable. You may not imagine the magnitude of our concern for the safety of your delicate feet as you walk along rocky tracts and thorny tracks. To tell you the very truth, we feel nervous and agitated to press them against our hard bosoms for fear that they may get injured thereby. Is it just that you desert us in these thick woods when we have come to solicit love at your feet ? It is said that when Raakshasas raid the celestial cities and rout their armies, you intervene and put them to flight and secure victory for the *devas*. Here we are, helpless, innocent women, who have put our trust in you. Why do you tarry, why do you not hasten, to rescue us from the attack of our foe who wields the sugar-cane bow and the five flowery arrows ? O Govinda ! We are crushed, our hearts are shattered, under his barrage. We are undone. Has not our wail reached you ? Pray, be merciful !".

IV - 28 - (6) The Lord's Darsan :

As the wail of the women reaches its crescendo and the appeals for His presence become insistent, the Protector of the Worlds reappears before them as the Enchanter *par excellence*, with a purple silk raiment around his loins and shining ornaments and garlands decorating his chest. On seeing him, the

lovelorn ladies, from whom life and liveliness seem to have departed, feel rejuvenated and stand before him with brightened loveliness. One of them salutes him with reverence and fondly holds his hand; another lifts his hand over her back and rejoices; a third falls at his feet and presses them with her bosom; a fourth knits her eye-brows and casts angry looks at him for his late abrupt withdrawal. Another lovely damsel fixes a stare on his face drinking in his beauty without a wink; yet another belle entraps him in the coils of her looks, and transporting him into herself, enjoys union with him within the confines of her heart. The reactions of the gopikas vary in accordance with their temperaments and desires : "Whither are you gone ?" "How could your legs support your withdrawal ?" "Thank God, I could remain alive till your return". "How cruel is my fate that it has kept you away from me so long ?" "What crime have I done to deserve this punishment of separation from you ?" "How fortunate am I that I am able to set my eyes on you again ?" "You know, sister, that I have taken a vow not to speak to him unless spoken to : I shall not break it." "I shall not seek his company; it is for him to extend his hand of fellowship. You know, friend, how highly sensitive I am in such matters." "Why should I look at him, an unceremonious deserter ? But how difficult it is to keep away from him !" In all these diverse reactions, there is no gainsaying the fact that the common factor is intense love and longing for the Beloved and ecstasy in his presence and company. They are like spiritual aspirants who have found themselves in the presence of the Supreme Lord.

Krishna, accompanied by the innumerable gopikas, reaches an extensive sand-dune which enjoys the kiss of the clear waters of the Yamuna on its margins, which is brightened by the mellow rays of the smiling moon in full splendour, which is redolent with the sweet fragrance of various flower-blossoms, wafted by the gentle zephyr. The purity and serenity prevalent over the scene exert a salutary influence on the gopikas; the pangs of separation from their Beloved disappear; a solemn peace reigns in their hearts. They resemble *Sruti Kanyas* who have given up their desires under the influence of

illuminating Knowledge kindled by their *darsan* of Iswara. They cannot withstand the sight of Krishna standing; they remove their upper garments and pile them up to seat their Beloved. The Lord who finds his throne in the hearts of savants and saints, now feels happy to be seated on the cushion raised for him by his devotees. The gopa women honour their lover, shower gentle smiles and amiable looks on him, press his feet and limbs, and render other agreeable services to keep him in a happy frame of mind. They make a shrewd general observation that some people serve only those who have previously served them; some others serve those who have *not* served them at all; there are still some others who refrain from serving any — those who have served them or not served them. (That is, the first set will return the services received and thus free themselves from obligation; the second type do favours without expecting any return; the third category remain indifferent alike to those who serve them and those who do not). Krishna understands the implication of the gopikas charge, that he belongs to the class of callous persons. He characterises the first set of people as entirely selfish, whose mutual relationship is commercial, based on give-and-take and thus does not fulfil real friendly obligations; he considers the second type as magnanimous people who, prompted by pity, render help to the deserving in their need without expecting any return; he deems the third category of people as mean and heartless exploiters, who make no bones of sacrificing friends, foes and others alike, for their own aggrandisement. Krishna tells the ladies that he belongs to none of those groups; he is unique; he is the most merciful person, the most gracious friend, of all. It is only to make them aware of the need for unbroken contemplation to attain him that he has chosen to withdraw from their midst. He explains how if he appears before his devotee in the form which he wishes to serve, there is every possibility that the devotee feels satisfied and gives up thinking of him any further. It is only to obviate that contingency that he withdraws from sight, so that his devotees may constantly contemplate on the form they have visioned. Krishna explains that he is not unmindful of, much less ungrateful for, the candour and fervour with which his devotees serve him.

Prompted by his desire to implant himself more firmly in their minds, he says that he has withheld his presence for a brief while from them; and that he is sorry to have caused them such harrowing misery by so doing. He wonders how he can have the heart to inflict suffering on those who have clung to him in faith and devotion, and have chosen to renounce their affiliations with their homes, husbands, children, kith and kin? How can he be so thoughtless as to take offence at the bitter words they have spoken in their anguish during the spell of his withdrawal from their company? Krishna admires their whole-hearted, undivided, attachment and devotion to him; he declares that it is only to reward their faith in him that he has made them pass through the ordeal of separation and endowed them with minds firmly set on contemplating him, thus ensuring eternal spiritual kinship with them. The Vraja women feel elated with his soft, comforting words; all their agony in separation yields place to ecstasy in his presence. They seem to have shed their worldly entanglements; they now feel free to float on empyrean element.

IV - 28 - 7. Raasaleela :

It is at this time that Krishna has indulged in a magnificent Raasaleela, a grand community-dance; he is in the centre flanked by two Veena players; he has formed a huge circle of the admiring damsels; he has multiplied himself and positioned his replicas between every pair of them. As the musicians play on their instruments, he applies his flute to his lips and joins them in producing hilarious music; then all the participants move in a circle dancing in rhythmic tune. It is a grand spectacle; Krishna holds the centre of the stage, standing in an attractive pose with the left leg crossing the right and the lovely neck inclined to the left and the flute poised at his lips and the fingers busy with the manipulation of stops to breathe out heavenly music. In tune with the divine strains and rhythms, the gopa damsels, with Krishna manifesting himself between every pair, perform an ecstatic dance. Krishna shines like sapphire amidst gold ornaments; he looks as a dark cloud with dazzling flashes of lightning brightening its edges; he

impresses like a mountain-summit with sparkling streams coursing down its sides. He is the universal Enchanter. Resting his delicate feet lightly on the sands, he stretches his beautiful arms around the necks of the ladies flanking him; and with a smile lit upon his lovely face, he engages himself in a circular dance with his companions in varying degrees of tempo and rhythm, and in forward, backward and sideward movements. Expert dancer that he is, he displays an infinite variety of exquisite postures and poses, exposing the attractive features of his majestic form — locks of hair, forehead, eyes, ears, nose, cheeks, neck, chest, waist, arms, thighs, shins and feet — and the scintillating ornaments and apparel and garlands which form his decorations. The damsels, inspired by their leader's enthusiasm, spare no effort to prove their excellence and make the performance a superb sport — that has never been witnessed before and never will be seen in future—*na bhooto na bhavishyati*. It is an absorbingly fascinating picture that the damsels present as they sing and dance with Krishna — with their faces lit with bright looks, genial smiles, curly forelocks and sparkling ear-studs, with their bosoms adorned with a matrix of garlands and necklaces, with their slender waving waists and loosened gold bands and with pearly beads of sweat sprouting on their bodies. Hearing their musical rhapsodies and accompanying rhythmic sounds of wristlets, bracelets and anklets, the celestial lords rush out in their chariots with their spouses, shower flowers on Krishna and his charming companions, beat their drums and blow their trumpets and celebrate the joyous occasion with a chorus in praise of the Lord. Enamoured by the sight of Krishna's *Raasakreea* and unable to contain their rapture, some of the celestial women lose control over themselves and fall into a faint; and their alert husbands provide timely support. Wind laden with the vapours of the river and the scents of the flowers in full bloom, blows on the merry company, to alleviate the strain of the sport and eliminate the discomfort of profuse sweating. A young damsel well-versed in music plays on her Veena, delineating the various notes of a single *raaga* in all the grades of pitch and tempo; and when Krishna nods in appreciation, she feels a thrill all over her body. Another belle, a danseuse, displays her skill in manoeuvring steps in tune

with the varying rhythms manipulated by her gingling waistbands and anklets; and, as the dance reaches the crescendo, she snatches Krishna's hand for support and rests her bosom on it. The sand-dune by the river, the moonlit night, the pleasant breeze, the jovial company, the charming music and the lively dance — it is a romantic scene, all in all, where a carefree abandon on the part of the participants is no misdemeanour but a permissible pastime, nay, a welcome accomplishment. The Vraja women have a field day of romance with their Beloved; to every gesture of theirs, there is a ready corresponding response. Reservations of any kind on the part of any one are quite out of place. Each gopika feels free to indicate her wish; and Krishna is quite ready to fulfil it, whatever it may be. Such is the magnitude and intensity of Krishna's graciousness and considerateness that none among the vast assemblage of Vraja women feels even a speck of disappointment; all of them feel exhilarated as they are honoured with the looks, smiles, contacts, utterances, kisses, embraces and such other shows of endearment in response to their wishes, expressed or unexpressed. No wonder that the unique experiences of the night make them oblivious of their bodies and their condition — clothed, half-clad or nude —; they are in the seventh heaven of happiness; they are in the auspicious company of the Spouse Divine. It is as an incarnation of Vishnu, and not as a ten-year-old gopa boy, that Krishna plays his role in this superb sport and enjoys it in spirit. But he multiplies himself and each one of his replicas appears before each one of the gopikas and satisfies her craving and creates a sense of fulfilment in her — and all the time he, the Over-Soul (*Paramatma*), is more or less sporting with gopa women, who happen to be His own reflections, the individual selves (*jeevatmas*). Do the gopikas regard Krishna as a human child? No. They know how in his swaddling clothes he has put an end to Putana, Sakatasura, Trinavarta; how as a little child he has killed wicked demons like Baka, Vatsa and Kapitha and Khara; how as a boy he has swallowed the wild wood-fire and humbled and expelled Kaliya and lifted the Govardhana mountain to protect the community from the wrath of Indra. The gopa women treat him as a Lover whose magnetism is

irresistible and whose companionship is essential to cleanse them of their lapses and to enable them to attain ineffable bliss. The romantic approach and the equally romantic response, though couched in physical terms smacking sensuality, have their springs in the domain of spirit. Agni consumes everything, clean and unclean; but no stain attaches to him; he remains pure. How can a human being remain undefiled when he associates himself with other women? It is Iswara that has remained unaffected when he has quaffed the most powerful *Haalahala* poison. Krishna is the Lord, contemplating on whose auspicious feet saints earn their release from the coils of *Samsaara*. Can the ordinary Code governing human conduct prescribe limitations for him? For One who is immanent in all living creatures and who pervades the whole universe, who are the 'outsiders'? Are not gopa women within His fold? It is good to remember that the great devotees of the Lord have taken birth, with His permission, as the gopikas to witness and enjoy the sports He indulges in during His incarnation as a human being, as Krishna.

IV - 28 - 8. **Jalakreeda :**

Jalakreeda follows *Raasakreeda*. A refreshing bath after a vigorous dance becomes a dire necessity. Krishna leads his tired companions to the river Yamuna. The ladies enter the cool waters and move step by step, giggling as they shiver, till they reach a depth that is level with their bosoms. They buffet the waves advancing towards them with outstretched hands; they admire the reflection of the full moon shaking in the waters disturbed by their entry; they waft aside the sheets of pollen of flowers strewn by the wings of the bees sucking in their honey; they squirm before the humming bees approaching hem mistaking their faces to be lotuses; they collect water in their palms and fling it on Krishna, enjoying the fun. Krishna returns the compliment and chokes them with jets aimed at their faces; they exchange jokes and amuse one another — Like a mighty tusker being drenched by the jets of water spouted by the elephant-queens, Krishna revels in joy, during his immersion, in the waters sprinkled on him by the lively damsels; he rejoices when he is covered with the pollen of

flowers flung at him; he shines like the thousand-eyed Indra when lotus petals showered on him by his jolly companions stick to his body; he smiles like the rising sun as the waters stained by the vermilion paint of the gopika bosoms redden his face. With the radiant smiles of his hilarious companions playing about him, he looks like a sapphire mountain illumined by sheaves of moon-beams. The sport in the Yamuna waters refreshes and rejuvenates the gopa women; and they come out and wander in the woods in the company of their Lover with hearts filled with indescribable happiness. These ladies have a natural tendency and a wonderful capacity to imprint on their minds a concatenation of the magnificent pictures of their lover in the various poses and situations, and stow them in their retentive memories for future reference and reflection. They return home in the early hours of the dawn; and their menfolk receive them without any remonstrance whatsoever. The very people who have made a scene when their women have left homes in the night now remain agreeably silent when they return. Maybe, Krishna has mysteriously brought about this welcome change in them.

IV - 28 - 9. The import of the Romance :

The episodes of the musical extravaganza in the Brindavana woods, and the Raasakreeda on the sand-dunes of Yamuna, bring out in a refreshing manner the adventurous pilgrimage of the human soul in quest of the Spouse Divine and its culmination in the attainment of absolute eternal bliss. The basic qualification for undertaking this expedition is the *orientation* of the soul to the Supreme. The gopa women have known Krishna at close quarters; they are fascinated by the beauty of his form and features; they have watched with admiration his juvenile exploits and mysterious triumphs over wicked demons; they are convinced that Krishna is no other than Lord Vishnu who has condescended to take birth in the gopa community to do them honour, apart from his larger mission of eliminating the evil elements from the world. It is therefore natural for them to *incline* towards him and to make the utmost use of his proximity to them.

Krishna goes alone into the woods near Brindavana on a full moon night in *Sarat* season; and standing on the bank of Yamuna intones a song on his flute. The breeze wafts the melodious strains to the village. The women listen to the captivating music; they consider it as a call from their lover. *Sravanam*, attentive listening, provides an irrepressible urge to instantaneous response. The gopa women are very much excited; they are engaged in their domestic chores; but they have no mind to complete the work in hand; they abruptly turn away from it; they cannot afford to waste time; they rush out of their homes; set at naught the remonstrances of their husbands, sons and other kith and kin; they must hasten to meet Krishna in the woods. Thus they demonstrate that all worldly interests and even close relationships are to be renounced. As they stand as obstacles in the way to reach the Lord, they are to be summarily rejected. What is needed at the moment is expeditious compliance to the summons (*tvāra*). What gives momentum to their activity is the restless eagerness (*utkanttha*) to meet the Lord and have his *darsan*. They manage to find their way to where Krishna stands, filling the world with ravishing melody. They tell him that they are happy to be with him; and that they cannot afford to stay at home for such is the urgency of love that they cannot live without meeting him, without having his *darsan*.

And what is Krishna's reaction? He lectures them on their violation of the accepted code of behaviour and of the dangerous consequences of their lapse and admonishes them for taking risks in crossing the woods at dead of night. He counsels them to return to their homes, make amends for their impulsive behaviour and get reconciled to their husbands and families. Here is an acid test for the devotees; the Lord wishes to know whether their visit to him is prompted by an evanescent curiosity, a short-lived impulse, or a genuine and steady devotion. All of them have had the pleasure of seeing him (*darsan*). But those whose wish is *only to see him* feel satisfied and they take the salutary counsel offered to them and return home. But the gopa ladies have renounced everything in the world for the sake of living with Krishna as their lord and

lover; and there is no question of leaving him. They are disappointed with his callous attitude and cruel rejection of their suit; they reason hard with him and, for fear that argument may fail, they prostrate at his feet and crave for mercy. They stand the test; they prove how staunch their love for him is and how unwavering their devotion to him. Life without him is death : that is their strong conviction; and they have come to stay with him : that is their intense longing. Krishna accedes to their appeal and sports with them. The gopa women are elated. *Darsan* has resulted in close companionship. (*Saannidhyam*)

But even as the hilarious company reaches the zenith of merriment, Krishna abruptly withdraws himself from the scene. They become mad when they miss him. Then follows an agonising search for him (*anveshana*). The quest offers them an opportunity to proclaim their appreciation of his attractive features and admirable qualities, through the process of their enquiring plants about his whereabouts. They lose their individual identities and get absorbed in Krishna's personality and imitate his ways in working miracles. They observe his foot-prints and draw inferences from their juxtaposition with the female foot-prints about his romantic pastimes. They recount their own experiences in his company with avidity and enthusiasm and express regret that his absence prevents them from further delights in love-making. They fail to trace him; they realise that none can *find* him out; they now praise him, extol his miraculous deeds. prostrate at his feet, and wail that they are undone, and piteously pray to him to *disclose* himself. Krishna takes pity on them and reappears before them, now that the purpose of his withdrawal is served; the gopikas have firmly implanted in their minds the Lover they have visioned and learnt to contemplate on him. Thus their search for him results in whole-hearted attachment (*hrudayaanubandham*) and unflinching devotion to him. (*viduvaleni prapatti*)

Thus the gopa women have lifted themselves from the mundane to a spiritual plane. They become eligible for a status equal to that of their Lover. Then follows the *Raasaleela*; the community exercise of music and dance, in which the devotees and the Deity indulge as *equal* participants. The

gopikas form a circle; Krishna multiplies himself; and his manifestations station themselves in alternate positions, so that Krishna is in close contact with the gopikas on either side of him. The Raasakreeda represents the coming together of the individual souls hungering for love (*jeevatmas*) and the Supreme Lover, the Spouse Divine (*Paramaatma*) accepting their love and devotion, and celebrating their union in rhapsodic music and exhilarating dance. The pilgrimage has ended; the destination is reached. The haven of peace and bliss opens its gates and welcomes the pilgrims. Hence-forward there is no question of separation from the Beloved; the inextricable soul-kinship is firmly established.

The Vraja women get back to their homes and perform their mundane duties. True; but this is a mechanical routine; they are free from the shackles of *Samsaara*. Their hearts are occupied with Krishna; they are absorbed in the contemplation of his charming features, and in the recollection of his mysterious exploits and miraculous deeds; that is the real world they live in ever after, whether Krishna is physically present or not.

Here is a lesson for aspirants of spiritual life. God-Orientation (*Bhagavadaabhimukhyam*) forms the basis of spiritual endeavour. Attentive listening (*sravanam*) to the Voice of the Lord acts as an irresistible urge (*tvara*) to meet the Lord face to face. Glimpsing the Lord (*darsanam*) rouses an intense longing for His uninterrupted company. A quest to recapture the vision (*anveshana*) implies constant reflection and meditation on the Lord's form, features and attributes and exploits (*mananam*). This process of self-effacement and absorption in the Lord (*nidhidhyasam*) culminates in the Lord graciously vouchsafing His eternal companionship (*saannidhyam*) and ineffable bliss (*niravadhikaanandam*) in union. The gopa women must have, unwittingly perhaps, progressed along these stages and attained the bliss of union with the Spouse Divine.



IV - 29. MORE EXPLOITS

IV - 29 - (1) Sudarsana :

Nanda and other gopa elders set out for Lambikavana to participate in the annual festival celebrations. They took their bath in river Saraswati; they worshipped the deities, Uma and Maheswara and observed fast. As they were relaxing in the night, a huge python bit Nanda and attempted to swallow him. Nanda raised an alarm and cried for help from Krishna. His associates woke up and attacked the serpent with clubs but failed to make it release Nanda. Krishna rushed upon the scene and stamped it heavily with his foot. Relinquishing its loathesome body, the serpent transformed itself into a handsome Vidyadhara, Sudarsana by name, and stood before Krishna with his hands joined in grateful salutation. On enquiry, he narrated how in his arrogant self-esteem, generated by his possession of charming features, he heckled Angirasas for their physical deformities; and how they cursed him to become an ugly reptile. He entreated them to withdraw, or at least, to modify their sentence; and then they relented and said that Janardana would incarnate in Yadukula and that he would visit the woods one day and kick him with his foot; and then he would be freed from their curse and regain his original form. He prostrated before Krishna, praised him, expressed his gratitude, and took leave of him. This episode exposes how arrogance, on any score, invites punishment and humiliation; the excuse of the insolence may be noble descent, profound scholarship, inexhaustible wealth, extensive power, or, as in this case of Sudarsana, matchless beauty. It is sheer impudence on the part of those who possess them to make merry at the expense of others who may be lacking in those particular accomplishments. The victims of the fun may be in possession of other types of affluence; and they will be justified in drawing upon those powers to retaliate the offence, as the Angirasas have done in applying the corrective to the Vidyadhara : 'Sudarsana' becomes metamorphosed into 'Durdarsana'; the charming Vidyadhara gets transformed into a repulsive serpent; beauty has turned his head to arrogance; it is now replaced by ugliness which has bowed his head in humility. Pride goes

before a fall. But resurrection comes from the grace of God; His touch purifies and elevates. The vile serpent is transformed into the handsome Vidyadhara. Punishment awakens penitence; repentance culminates in resurgence.

IV - 29 - (2) Sankhachooda :

Balarama and Krishna marched into the woods in a moonlit night to relax themselves. The gopa women gathered there in advance, prompted by the refreshing cool breeze and the mellow light and the drone of the bees flitting over the honeyed jasmin blossoms. The brothers felt an urge to sing; and as the melody spread, the gopikas fell under its spell. They lost control over their bodies; they closed their eyes; they remained quiet; they immersed themselves in the flood of music. Sankhachooda was one of the servitors of Kubera and belonged to the race of Yakshas, who were well-known for their light-hearted pastimes and indulgence in music, dance and sensual pleasures. He took advantage of this situation and exercising his mysterious yogic power carried them off towards the north. This forcible lifting awakened the gopa women; they felt frightened like cattle on the sight of a tiger; they raised a loud wail, imploring the help of Balarama and Krishna. The brothers bestirred themselves; they plucked sal trees for their weapons and challenged the guhyaka to a fight. Sankhachooda turned round; he saw the brothers closing in upon him with menacing looks; he took fright and fled leaving the gopikas. Krishna told Balarama to take charge of the released women; and he went in chase of the offender. The fugitive changed forms and directions to escape detection. But his clever devices failed; Krishna was too shrewd to be misled by his manoeuvres. He caught hold of him; pounded his head with his sledgehammer fist; and snatched away the shining diamond that adorned his hair and made a present of it to his brother, Balarama. The gopa women were eye-witnesses to this admirable exploit of Krishna; they were filled with wonder and excitement at his courage, strength and prowess. Sensuality, villainy and crookedness, when cloaked with outward glamour and employed in congenial and opportunistic moments, may appear to thrive for a while, in the initial stages, against simple and inno-

cent people; but they are bound to recoil on their perpetrators before long, for the simple reason that God comes to rescue those who call for His aid in their helpless plight. The devotees who pin their faith to God are never lost; He never fails them; and in the process the villain is deprived of the shine with which he tempts the innocent.

IV - 29 - (3) **Vrishabhaasura :**

Vrishabha was a mighty *raakshasa* who was held in dread by the world. His hump appeared like a mountain-summit and clouds seemed to seek harbour about it; his bellow was a thunderous roar which threatened to shatter the fetuses of pregnant women; the storm of dust raised by his hooves stamping on the earth spread darkness over the luminaries of the sky; huge trees got uprooted when he struck at them in peevish moods. Conscious of his great might and certain of his victory, he arrived at Nandavraja in a fierce fighting trim to challenge Krishna and put an end to him. He dug his feet and clawed dust and darkened the sky; he raised his tail like a flag-staff; he rent the air with a terrible bellow; he poised his sharp horns for a fierce attack. The terrified calves ran to their mothers; the cows hurried to the stud bulls; and all the cattle huddled together towards the gopas; and panic seized them and they ran for their very lives, raising piteous cries craving for Krishna's help. Vrishabha waxed in pride as he pursued them. Krishna intercepted the chase and addressed the *raakshasa* : "Look ! Is there any credit in driving cattle, women and children ? You may show your prowess elsewhere. Nandavraja is not the proper arena. If still you choose to show forth your valour here, take note that tiger Krishna will not let you slip before he splits your neck and puts an end to you." The Bull did not heed the warning but hurled his challenge; Krishna showed an air of defiance; a contemptuous smile lit his face as he got ready to engage the demon in fight. Infuriated by this impish impertinence, Vrishabha flourished his tail, pawed volumes of dust with his sturdy legs, emitted sparks of fire from his eyes, and attacked Krishna with his sharp horns. The alert Krishna caught hold of his horns and holding them in iron grip, he kicked his sides incessantly. The obstinate Bull managed

to free himself but returned to the charge with greater violence. Krishna lost no time in overpowering the demon; he dashed him down, pressed him hard to the ground with his foot, plucked his horns out forcibly, and using them as weapons he battered him to death. In this way, Krishna effected depletion of rakshasa strength and accession to celestial might. Vrishabha presented a ghastly picture with blood spouting out of his mouth and nostrils, with the viscera emptying their loathesome contents and with sharp puffs of breath expelling life. The celestials breathed a sigh of relief on this welcome riddance and rained flowers on Krishna and sang his praises. The gopas and the womenfolk were filled with ecstasy at this marvellous exhibition of their lord's prowess, which was quite in piece with the series of his earlier exploits.

Vrishabhasura typifies the promoter and propagator of demoniac qualities : Vrishabha means *sabda*; and the *sabdas* that this demon bellows smack of *aasuric* characteristics; the intent is to spread villainy and wickedness in the world. The means adopted are bluff and bluster, threat and coercion, for the dissemination of evil thoughts and unwholesome words and glorification of destructive deeds. It is absolutely essential that such nefarious and vicious propaganda, which contaminates the mind, stains the tongue and soils the hands, is brought to check and speedily eliminated, Krishna's liquidation of Vrishaabhasura signifies the erosion of all literature that carries the tinge of evil in thought, word and deed.

IV - 29 - (4) Kesi and Vyoma :

Kesi was a mighty and wicked rakshasa in the form of a horse. The heavy stamp of his hooves on the earth increased the pressure on the hoods of the Serpent bearing the burden of the world; his fierce neigh frightened the stars in the sky; the constant movement of sheaves of his luxuriant mane generated gales which drove clouds helter-skelter; the broad face with a mouth like a cavern disclosed sharp dentures which shone as the tongues of Flame at the time of Dissolution (*pralayagni*); his raised tail resembled the noose of Kaala and spelt death for his victims. He was proud that Devendra himself could not resist

his prowess; he wished to establish his superiority over Krishna by a fierce assault on Brindavana. Kesi, the horse-demon arrived with the speed of wind and with a challenging neigh, which sent shivers along the spines of the Yadava heroes. Panic seized the entire village. The belief that there was none who could face him in combat emboldened the Rakshasa to exhibit his impudence. Attacking the weak was a clear violation of the code of war, but such scruples did not disturb the wicked tyrants. Krishna quickly intervened and took up the gauntlet of challenge. Kesi became furious, made a thunderous neigh, opened his cavernous mouth and sprang on Krishna to crush him under his teeth. But his alert opponent stepped aside at the nick of the moment and averted his bite. But the resourceful demon attempted to kick his enemy with his powerful hind legs; in this also he failed as Krishna distanced himself away from their reach. So far, Krishna was on the defence. He now became aggressive; his eyes sparked fire; he caught hold of the feet of the horse and flung him away into the distance, in the same way as the eagle would cast its serpent-victim. The repulsed Kesi renewed his attack with redoubled vigour, feeling certain that his opponent would be finished. Krishna did not avoid him this time; he thrust his mighty hand in the horse's mouth; it was like pushing a venomous serpent into a mountain-cavern. As the granite left hand found its way into the throat, it struck at the horse's teeth and pounded them into powder; it pierced still further into the enemy's stomach and grew bigger and bigger, and stifled his breath. Kesi was stunned and paralysed; with his vital breath suppressed, his body sweated profusely, his eyes bulged out of their sockets; he groaned and fell precipitately dead. His stomach could not contain the ever-expanding hand within it; it burst into two like an over-ripe cucumber. Thus did Krishna work out, with sportive ease, the fall of the violent, wicked, self-conceited Ghotakaasura. The gopa folk, relieved of their fear, praised their lord and protector; the celestials celebrated Krishna's victory by raining flowers on him and singing praises of him.

Kesi, according to scholars, represents the arrogance of ego; his identification of body (*sareera*) with self (*Jeeva*) makes

him self-conceited. He does not recognise that what he calls 'I' (*aham*) is *not* the body, *not* the mind, *not* the intellect, but something inherently different from them and infinitely superior to them and on which his very life depends. It is this want of proper understanding of his real nature that finds inflated expression in exploits of enormous strength and power; but these prove worthless when pitted against the source of all such accomplishments. Here is a wholesome lesson to spiritual aspirants; they need all the alertness at their command to avoid the pitfalls of egoistic pride, of unwarranted overconfidence in their attainments.

On one occasion, Krishna and his companions, while tending their herds near a mountain, wanted to relax by indulging in a merry sport. Some of them deemed themselves as flocks of sheep; some others styled themselves as shepherds in charge of them; and the rest played the role of robbers. Vyoma, the eldest son of Mayaasura, assumed the form of a cowherd and joined the group of robbers with the mischievous motive of killing the whole lot of the boys engaged in this pastime. Vyoma played the role of thief to perfection; he managed to drive the boys in batches into a mountainous cave; he congratulated himself upon his achievement; he closed the opening of the cave with a huge rock to prevent the egress of the prisoners. He returned to the scene of the play. Krishna, the all-seeing, all-knowing Supreme, welcomed the demon with a smile; he appreciated Vyoma's skill in cheating innocent boys and inveigling them into the cave-prison; he challenged him to repeat the trick with him. So saying, Krishna sprang upon Vyoma like a lion on a wolf and caught him in his iron grip; the latter struggled hard to free himself. But Krishna was in no mood to show him any consideration; he tightened his hold; his opponent dropped down dead. Then Krishna kicked the stone, blocking the cave, into splinters and released his companions. The celestials admired his heroic triumph over the hated demon and showered flowers on him.

It is possible to deceive some people for all time; it is also possible to deceive all people for some time; but it is not possible to deceive all people for all time; it is impossible to

impose upon a person who knows the cheat and his mischievous misdemeanours; and it is fatal to measure swords with him. Vyoma's manoeuvring skill could cheat all the simple unsuspecting gopa boys for once; but it failed miserably when it was employed against the shrewd leader of the company. The demon's over-confidence in his strength to destroy any one in combat received a smashing blow when it was pitted against a more formidable foe. Trickery and wickedness are bound to fail in the long run when confronted with uprightness and virtue.

Some scholars opine that Vyoma (which means "open space, Soonya") does not believe in Causal Phenomenon, in God's existence or supremacy. He employs deceit to wean away simple unsuspecting people from their trusted leaders with a view to infecting them with his own pet revolutionary doctrine of nihilism (*soonyavaada*). He meets with a fatal reverse when he employs the same trick on Krishna, whom he deems to be a common human being. Spiritual aspirants should be on their guard and avoid falling into the Cave of Disbelief; if, by any chance, they are carried into it by demoniac urges, they should promptly invoke God's aid for release. The Supreme is ever ready to assert His authority and effect the redemption of those who put their implicit faith in Him.



V - TOWARD THE CATASTROPHE

V - 30. NARADA MEETS KRISHNA

Narada meets Govinda in secret and reminds him of his real nature and of the purpose of his incarnation; and of the great work that lies ahead of him. He describes Krishna as the Supreme Lord : "You are the Lord of the Universe; You create it; You sustain it; You dissolve it; You are immanent in all creatures; but like fire in a piece of wood You are unseen; You are the eternal witness of all the goings-on in the world. You have specially come into the world to put an end to the insolent and wicked Rakshasas and liberate the world from the forces of evil. Your mission has just begun. There are many problems awaiting solution. Chanura, Mushtika, Kuvalayapida, Kamsa, Saukha, Yavana, Mura, Naraka, Poundraka, Sisupala, Dantavakthra, Saiwa and other stalwarts await their turns to meet with their fall at Your hands. Nandanavana becomes less glamorous when You deprive it of Paarijaata; Nriga will be redeemed of the curse; the precious gem, Samantaka, will be restored to Satrajit by Your valour, and Your fair name will be cleared of the accusation of theft; the dead sons of Brahmana will be restored to life by Your intervention; finally, as the charioteer of Arjuna, You will bring about the devastation of numerous contingents of armies of several kingdoms. Even Brahma is incompetent to enumerate Your innumerable achievements. How can I dare to attempt what is impossible to do ?" Narada only forecasts how much of ameliorative work remains to be done by Krishna; he takes leave of him after making his reverent obeisances to the Lord.



V - 31. KAMSA'S STRATEGY

V -31 - (I) Kamsa in jitters :

Narada, the divine minstrel, saw that Kamsa's evil machinations reached their zenith and that it was time to get him finished. The way to accomplishing this objective was to provoke a direct confrontation between Kamsa and Krishna. Narada was known to be a generator of conflicts; creating situations for hostile elements to clash was his staple diet (*Kalahabhojana*). Narada was a universal benefactor as his efforts were always aimed at eliminating the forces of evil by bringing them into collision with their opposite. Narada visited the King and apprised him of the perilous situation he was in. He made Kamsa aware that the child, whom he deemed to be Devaki's daughter and who defied his murderous attempt, was born of Yasoda; that Devaki's aborted foetus got implanted in Rohini's womb and took birth as her child and was growing under the name of Balarama; that Devaki's eighth issue, a son, who was transported to Yasoda's bedside was thriving in Nandavraja as Krishna. This revelation made Kamsa furious. He never imagined that such fraud was perpetrated under his very nose. He would immediately put an end to the cheat, Vasudeva. Narada intervened and cautioned him and made him drop his cruel design, as killing Vasudeva would not eliminate the danger to his life from Krishna. Kamsa ordered that Devaki and Vasudeva should be bound with iron shackles and kept in prison under watch.

He summoned the council of his ministers and chiefs of infantry, cavalry, and elephant-mounting fighting force, Kings of Kosala and Salwa, reputed wrestlers Chanura and Mushtika and other dignitaries. He despatched the demon, Kesi, to Brindavana to do away with Balarama and Krishna. He was very much disturbed in mind at the developments in his neighbourhood. He addressed the gathering : "Dear friends ! You know that Devendra and other celestial lords dare not face me in battle : Is it not odd that two young boys in Brindavana, Balarama and Govinda, go about boasting that they will put an end to me in battle ? It is time they are taught

a lesson. Arrange arenas for wrestling bouts in the different parts of the city and notify the people in advance to rouse their enthusiasm about these contests. O mighty Chaanura ! O brave Mushtika ! You have established great reputation as unrivalled heroes in this field of sport by overcoming numerous opponents in the past; and you have large contingents of trained, seasoned disciples in the art. It is for you to put an end to Balarama and Krishna and win my appreciation and the people's applause. Come, my dear Kuvalayapeeda, great chief of the elephants, your massive jaws dripping fat attract a hive of bees by their sweet fragrance ! The time has now come for you to prove your strength and proclaim your majesty. As the brothers from Brindavana approach the portals of the palace, block the passage and show your mettle in fighting them to the finish. Make animal-sacrifices to propitiate Pasupati. Let us perform *Dhanuryaaga* on Chaturdasi day in strict accordance with the prescribed ceremonial ritual and invoke His blessings for our success." Kamsa was agog with his plans for an all-out effort to destroy his enemy.

V - 31 - (2) Dhanuryaaga and Akrura's assignment :

After dismissing his council on the various errands entrusted to them, he detained Akrura, the famous Yadava minister in his court, and opened his heart to him. "Akrura ! How meaningful is your name, how eminently does it fit you ! You have justified your name; anger and cruelty are foreign to your nature, You intend no harm to any one; your straightforward conduct, your integrity and loyalty, make you a reliable friend. You must run an errand for me. It has come to my notice that, in response to the prayers of celestials, Vishnu has taken birth and is waxing strong in Nandavraja under the name of Krishna. I wish that you will extend an invitation, on my behalf, to the two brothers, Balarama and Krishna, and fetch them here to witness the *Dhanuryaaga*. You know that we have a mighty tusker which, when provoked, can smash rocks into pieces, nay, can shake even the huge globe of the universe; it is a mere child's play for it to crush these youngsters in fight. In the rare contingency of its failure to eliminate them, we have a more formidable second line of

attack. We have in our court two renowned wrestlers, adepts in the art of war, who are ill-disposed towards Hari. Chaanura and Mushtika will never tolerate rivals who challenge their supremacy; they are sure to put an end to the young enthusiasts. When Krishna and Balarama are thus eliminated, I shall have a field day. Be assured that I shall kill Vasudeva and other traitors, liquidate the heroes of Vrishni, Bhoja and Dasarna clans and suppress other enemies; I shall stamp under foot that old villain, uncle Ugrasena, who always hankers after the throne; and strike terror into my paternal uncle Devaka. With my friends Jarasandha, Naraka, Bana and Sambara, I shall establish my authority over all the worlds: You now have an idea of my whole strategy. It is inexpedient to allow enemies to wax in strength. Proceed at once to Brindavana; employ the tactics of a friendly approach; extend the invitation to *Dhanuryaaga* in my name; persuade the boys and fetch them to Mathura. I am sure you will succeed in your mission." Akrura made a thoughtful reply : O king ! is it for me to decline an assignment offered to me ? People do not bestow thought on the pros and cons of their actions. They act on impulse and reck not the consequences. Who can resist what is ordained by Providence ? Well, I obey your command. I shall fetch your enemies here." As Kamsa bade good-bye, Akrura got into the chariot and left for Brindavana.

V - 31 - (3) Akrura's pilgrimage to Brindavana :

As Akrura proceeded towards Brindavana, he was occupied with thoughts about Krishna whom he considered to be an incarnation of Hari. He wondered what severe penance he performed, what liberal gifts he made to deserving persons, what heights of righteousness and moral excellence he attained, in previous births, that he was blessed in the present life with the coveted opportunity of meeting, face to face, the Transcendental and Immanent Lord — a privilege that was beyond the reach of great sages with a fund of spiritual insight and fervent endeavour. Akrura felt grateful to Kamsa for the unsolicited favour he had done him in entrusting him with this mission of fetching Balarama and Krishna to Mathura. Though Kamsa's invitation to the *Dhanuryaaga*, which was

extended to the brothers in Nandavraja, was motivated by the wicked design of doing away with them, Akrura felt highly honoured that the tyrant chose him for the errand as that gave Akrura a golden opportunity of paying reverential homage to the Lord. At the same time, Akrura was disturbed in mind as to how he would be received by Krishna when he reached the destination. Coming as he would as wicked Kamsa's emissary, Akrura might be deemed to be a villain and treated with contempt. Or Krishna, who was all-knowing and all-pervasive, might apprehend his real nature as a devotee and friend and welcome him with love. He resigned himself to the working of Providence about how his visit would turn out to be. But there was a persistent prompting within him that he would certainly set his eyes upon Krishna's lovely countenance, lit by a genial smile and mellow looks and framed with curly locks of hair. He was confident that when he presented himself before Krishna and prostrated at his feet, the Lord would graciously stretch his protecting hand and touch his head, thus banishing fear and ensuring redemption from *samsara*. Such refreshing thoughts as these lightened the strain of his journey; and he reached Brindavana by dusk.

Akrura was deeply impressed by the scene he witnessed on his arrival at the precincts of the village. The air was filled with the cries of the boys summoning straying cattle to join the herd; the well-fed cows fondly remembered the calves and hastened homewards at a quick pace eager to give them the needed feed at their udders; then came groups of gopa boys, armed with weapons, who formed the guard on the flanks and in the rear, chasing away with their loud cries wild beasts which might be prowling in the vicinity. After entering the village, Akrura saw the activity in the cattle-sheds: the calves pulling hard at their tethers and, when released, jumping to their mothers for the feed; the sturdy bulls clashing their horns out of mutual jealousy, to win the favour of their pet mates; the elderly cowherds busily engaged in restoring order in the sheds; the gopa women leaving the household chores half-done and hastening to their appointed shelters to meet their enchanting lover, Krishna. Balarama and Krishna appeared on the

scene. Akrura saw the foot-prints of the brothers, descended from his chariot, and followed their track with a thrill in the body and with tears of joy trickling down his cheeks. The great moment had arrived for his *darsan* of the Lord. There stood before him the brothers, Balarama and Krishna ! What an enthralling sight ! Clad in blue and purple silk and decked in flower-garlands, there stood the heroes, their lotus-eyes, gentle smiles and dust-covered ringlets of hair playing on the forehead, adding to their charms and ensnaring the hearts of women in romantic love ! Akrura realised his cherished longing, fell prostrate at Krishna's feet and lost himself in devotion for a few moments. Krishna raised him and embraced him. What greater blessing could a devotee seek than his gracious embrace ? Akrura then prostrated before Balarama who gave him a similar hug. Krishna and Balarama escorted him to Nanda's house where warm welcome awaited him.

Nanda received the guest, seated him on a cushion, washed his feet, treated him to tasty food and refreshing drink, smeared him with sandal paste and other fragrant scents, and observed all other courtesies due to an honoured friend. Nanda felt hesitant to make enquiries about the welfare of the Yadavas; for, he could never be sure that they would be happy under the tyrant Kamsa, who had mercilessly put an end to Devaki's children despite his sister's piteous entreaties. Krishna was forthright in asking for information : "Dear Akrura, may I ask whether uncle Kamsa is giving you, your relations and friends, fair treatment, whether the people under his rule are free from fear and are happy ? How about Devaki and Vasudeva, who are cast into prison on the pretext of their being my parents ? They must have been crumbling with grief and sustaining their lives in the hope that relief will come to them. Are they tired with expectation ? Have they fallen into despondency that no help will be forthcoming ? Do let me know their present plight. Have they desired you to communicate any message to me ? Do enlighten us on the purpose of your visit". Akrura gave the whole story of Narada's visit and his disclosures to Kamsa of the secrets about the births of Balarama and Krishna, of Kamsa's fury at the fraud perpetrated by Vasudeva and Devaki and of Narada's timely counsel

to Kamsa to avoid the notoriety of committing a needless murder (of Vasudeva and Devaki) and to concentrate on a plan to get rid of his potential enemies (Krishna and Balarama). He explained how Kamsa devised the strategy of inviting the brothers to Mathura on the pretext of *Dhanuryaaga* and employed him as his emissary to Brindavana. Krishna and Balarama smiled and gladly accepted the invitation. Krishna told Nanda and other gopa elders to collect curds, ghee, milk and other gifts from all homes and make preparations for going to Mathura to witness the festivities of Kamsa's *yaaga*.

V - 31 - (4) The reactions of gopikas :

The news that Akrura was taking away Krishna to Mathura spread like wild fire among the gopikas. They were very much upset. What made their lives worth living was the presence of Krishna in their midst; his words, his laughter, his jokes, his funny frolics, his amusing sports, his miraculous exploits, became inextricably intertwined with their lives. They felt that, without Krishna, they would languish and die. They consulted one another to find a way of preventing this catastrophe. "Look, dear ! people extol Brahma as an ideal householder, gentle and generous. How untrue is this estimate of theirs ! See how he has shattered our pleasant lives by his cruel decree of withdrawing our lord from our midst ! Let us appeal to Bharati to intervene and see that this order is annulled. How about the behaviour of our own beloved ! Strange, he responds promptly to the call ! He does not say that he has not the heart to leave the delicate women doting on him, to the mercies of Cupid ! It is curious that Nanda and other elders do not object to his leaving us. Who is this messenger from Mathura ? He calls himself Akrura (one devoid of mercilessness); if he is really generous, he should go his way and not take Krishna with him. No, he is hard-hearted; he has come on purpose to deprive us of the company of our lord. We are undone. Once Krishna goes into the city, he will be captivated by the charming beauties raining flowers on him from their balconies; they will bind him hard with their enticing glances, shrewd words, clever manipulations and subtle manoeuvres — with all the accomplishments of city-bred

women. He will be engrossed in dalliance with his new conquests ! He will erase us from his mind ! We are ruined. Providence is partial to the ladies of the city; they, who are strangers to Hari till now, are to claim him as their own. And we, who have lived and grown with him for years, are cast into a hell of torment ! How can we blame our dear lord, if he is fascinated by the refined and fashionable ladies, who have just entered into the orbit of his love ? What are we to do in this precarious predicament ? Shall we entreat Akrura to give up his plan of taking Krishna with him ? Shall we pray to the celestials to intervene and save us from this ugly perilous situation ? Shall we fall at full length at Krishna's feet and block his way and prevent his going ?" The panic-stricken gopa women did not know what they could do. They gave up reserve, they raised a sharp wail of grief with hot tears streaming down their cheeks; they joined their hands in prayer and lifted them to their foreheads; they shook like creepers in a gale as they prayed to Govinda to take pity on them and stay with them. But Krishna had to go to Mathura; he could not stay behind. The gopa women got ready to go with him. Krishna assured them through an intermediary that he would return and thus mollified their anguish. As Krishna and Balarama mounted the chariot, Akrura handled the reins and urged the horses to move. The gopa women stood helpless, staring at the departing lover. At the outset they could see Krishna and pointed to him for some time; later, they could only spot his garland, and then they saw only the dust raised by the horses' hooves. It was only after the chariot was completely out of sight that the women slowly moved back into their homes.

V - 31 - (5) Akrura's ecstatic experience :

As the chariot headed towards Mathura, Krishna noticed with delight Kalindi, shining with crystal waters, tickled with gentle zephyr. This lake was cleared of the venomous snakes with the expulsion of Kaliya and was sanctified with the touch of the Lord's feet and became worthy of praise by poets. The brothers refreshed themselves with a draught of the waters, and got into the chariot which was left in the shade of a cluster

of trees. Akrura then took their permission and walked into the waters; chanting Vedic incantations, he had a bath; and while bathing he saw Balarama and Krishna in the waters. He wondered when they happened to reach there; for a little while ago when he left them, they were seated in the chariot. He turned his eyes and there they were in the chariot. Akrura could not understand this strange phenomenon of simultaneous appearance of the brothers on the chariot and in the river waters; he even felt that this double vision must be the working of his straying mind. He looked again into the waters; and this time a more glorious spectacle greeted him. There rose before him the ever gracious and graceful lord of the serpents, Sesha, his resplendent thousand hoods supporting the earth; he was clad in blue garments and attended upon by *siddhas* and *uragas*. In a moment Sesha folded his body into a broad and elevated bedspread; and stretched on this bed lay a person of entrancing beauty. He was the Lord Vishnu. His body had the sapphire glow of a cloud; on His chest appeared Sridevi like a lightning flash; from His lotus-navel emerged His offspring, the four-faced Brahma. With His lotus-eyes and arched eye-brows, beaming face and prominent forehead, aquiline nose, well-set mouth, crimson lips, conch-shaped neck, protruding chest and leonine waist, strong arms and sturdy legs, He presented a magnificent figure. The sparkling crown and ear-studs, armlets, bracelets, waist-bands, anklets — all ornaments of gold studded with diamonds, the bright red mole (*Srivatsa*), the shining gem (*Kaustubha*), pearl necklaces and garlands of fragrant flowers and aromatic leaves on the chest, the purple silk covering the waist, the conch, disc, mace and lotus adorning the four hands — all these added to the magnetism of his personality. He was attended upon by Maaya and other mysterious powers; he was surrounded by devotees like Prahlada and Narada who sang his praises. Moved to the depths by this grand vision of the Supreme Person, the thrilled Akrura humbled himself in reverent salutation and raised a paeon of praise and glorification. "O Lord of auspiciousness, the captivator of Sri Lakshmi's heart, the Originator of the universe ! After the great Dissolution involving all worlds, You have emerged as Narayana, a child floating on the raging sea;

in Your sport You have brought Brahma into being out of Your Lotus-navel within which lies hidden the entire universe; the primary elements of space, air, fire, water and earth, mind and *ahamkaara*, the worlds and their seeds in essence, have their being in Your huge body; they flourish through Your sustenance, and perish at Your will but You remain unaffected as the Transcendental Spirit. Who can understand Your mysterious power? Who can delve into Your miraculous sports? Could Brahma be the creative force behind this wonderful universe, a magnificent product of an artist's genius? Some thinkers regard You as the Eternal Witness and Immanent Spirit; the Vedic scholars esteem You as the One Indwelling Spirit variously called Indra, Varuna and other celestial lords; some other aspirants deem You as the Source and Fountain of all Knowledge and renounce all activities, break off their bonds with worldly life and take to ascetic practices; some devotees worship You under four different *Vyuha* forms as Sankarshana, Vaasudeva, Aniruddha, Pradyumna; and a large number seek Your grace adoring You under myriad names, Narayana, Siva, *et cetera*, in the firm belief that all ways of approach finally lead to the same destination, Your hallowed Footstool. Do not all rivers speeding along their different courses meet at the same goal, the profound sea! Devotees forego their individualities, faiths lose their separate affiliations, when they merge in You and become one. The moon in the sky and that in the pot of water are not two but one; the latter is the reflection of the former. You are the One without a second; and you are the One Alone; Siva is Your face; the sun and the moon are Your eyes; the quarters (*diks*) are Your ears; the earth is Your foot; the seas are Your stomach; mountains are Your bones; the creepers are Your hairs; air is Your vital breath; Indra and the celestials are Your arms; clouds are Your locks of hair; the firmament is the region of Your navel; days and nights are Your eye-lids; Brahma is Your genital organ; rain is Your semen (*veeryam*); heaven is Your head; all series of aquatic creatures, all varieties of trees, all species of animals, birds, insects and crawling creatures, in their condensed germinal essence fill Your stomach. Thought shudders, imagination flutters, words falter, to comprehend and describe Your magnificent Cosmic

manifestation. You have assumed the form of a formidable Fish to recover the Scriptures from the Demon thief hiding in the depths of the seas and restore them to Brahma; You have slashed with Your disc the demons Madhu and Kaitabha; You have as Turtle lifted the Mandara from sinking during the churning of the Sea of Milk; You have destroyed the Rakshasa as a wild White Boar and released the Earth from captivity; You have as Lion-man put an end to the arrogant Hiranyakasipu to prove his son's faith in Your existence and supremacy; You have humbled Yourself as Vamana and solicited a favour from Bali, only to fill the universe with Your stature and prove Your proprietorship of all affluence and knock the pride out of the imperialist donor; You have, as Parasu Rama, devastated the arrogant community of kings to establish order in the world; as Sri Rama, You have eliminated the lustful Ravana, the wicked abductor of chaste women, and released Sita from his captivity; You have cleansed the world of evil forces as Vaasudeva; as Buddha You have brought Your enemies to book by melting the hearts of their wives and getting them oriented towards You. How can I know how You shine forth as Kalki? I am a slave in the grip of illusion; I am driven to despair; I am a humble solicitor for Your grace. O Merciful Lord reclining on the snake-bed, I offer my humble salutations to You, time and again, and crave for pardon and protection," Akrura confessed that he was one among those who pursued optical illusions to quench their thirst; that he relished attachments to wife, children, kith and kin, without realising their dream-like unreality. He prayed to the Lord to cast His gracious glances at him and disclose His lotus-feet for his worship. As Akrura still kept on looking into the river, the reclining form of Vishnu receded with the snake-bed. Balarama and Krishna appeared in its place, as before, for a while, before total withdrawal from the waters. Balarama was Sesha's incarnation, as Krishna was Vishnu's.

Akrura slowly walked back to the chariot with wonder and excitement writ large on his face. Krishna questioned him as to why it took so long a time for him to take a bath in the river which was so near; and enquired whether he saw in the waters any strange wonders, not commonly met with on the

earth or in aerial region. To this Akrura gave a cryptic reply that there could be no wonders in the firmament or on the earth or in the waters which could not be found in Krishna, who was the wielder of all such mysteries and miracles. Nanda and other gopa elders reached Mathura and camped on the outskirts by the time Akrura's chariot reached the city. The brothers joined Nanda and bade good-bye to Akrura. Akrura extended invitation to them to be his guests and urged them to sanctify their devotee's home with the dust off their feet. Krishna assured him that he would be glad to visit him after he had done with Kamsa, whose persistent cruelty and hostility made life perilous to Yadavas.

Akrura was one of those Yadavas who did not migrate to other kingdoms but remained at Mathura in the service of Kamsa. He was a great devotee of Krishna; and he felt that there could be no better friend than Kamsa, when he chose him to be his emissary to Brindavana. Though he knew that, Kamsa's *dhanuryaaga* was a mere pretext to draw Balarama and Krishna into the vortex of his wicked designs to end them, he knew also that Kamsa was thereby inviting his own ruin. He was overjoyed that Kamsa's commission gave him the opportunity to satisfy his longing to pay homage to the Lord and indirectly to initiate the measures of redemption of the world from the demoniac forces. He was Akrura not only in name but also in spirit; illwill and cruelty were foreign to his nature; equipoise in all circumstances was his main forte. While he did not openly condemn Kamsa for his conspiracy, his indirect caution that decisions made on impulse would bring disaster proved, beyond doubt, his *sattvic* nature. His visit to Nandavraja was amply rewarded by the *darsan* of the Lord in Yamuna waters, the glorious vision of Vishnu reclining on the snake-bed in the Sea of Milk. He felt that his life had attained fulfilment by his visit to Brindavana. Kamsa had previously assigned the duty of eliminating Krishna to his wicked accomplices like Putana, Sakatasura, Trinavarta *et cetera*; they failed miserably in their task; they could not kill Krishna; instead they suffered death at his hands and so could not even return to report their failure. Now that cruelty (*krourya*) did not succeed,

Kamsa changed his tactics. He employed Akrura, who was singularly free from the taint of cruelty, *not to kill* Krishna but to *fetch* him to Mathura by enticing him with an invitation to the *Dhanuryaaga*. He thought that Nanda and other gopas would trust the words of a member of the Yadava community and agree to send the brothers with him to Mathura without any hesitation or reservation. And he was right in his choice of his emissary. But Akrura was also a devotee of Krishna; he was incapable of exercising fraudulent tricks on the lord; he was absolutely guileless; his transparency in detailing Kamsa's wicked purpose and in explaining his own mission led to a cheerful acceptance of the invitation. Akrura succeeded not only in convincing the brothers to agree to his request but also in reporting to Kamsa that he could carry out his assignment without any flaw. Kamsa was happy that his plan worked wonderfully.

Akrura had the satisfaction of pleasing his master Kamsa, with his dutiful service. As a devotee of the Lord, he was exhilarated by the wonderful vision he had of Him while carrying out his master's command. This he considered as an invaluable reward and an exceptional blessing which he could not anticipate when he set out on his mission. The charm of mystic experience lies in its unexpected timing and in its unfading abidance ! Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God ! Blessed are the meek in spirit, for they shall inherit Heaven !



V - 32. KRISHNA IN MATHURA

V - 32 - (i) Warm reception by city ladies :

Krishna, accompanied by Balarama and a few companions, entered the city of Mathura at noon. He was impressed by its strong forts and fortifications, its beautiful groves and gardens, its wide streets and large mansions, its granaries,

armouries and treasuries, its chariots, horses, elephants and warriors. News of his advent spread like wild-fire. There was great commotion and excitement among the womenfolk. They had been eagerly longing for a glimpse of the wonder-boy of Nandavraja — the fruit of Nanda's penance, the repository of all virtues, the fountain of mercy, the feast to the eyes of the Divine Consort (Lakshmi), the treasure the spiritual aspirants hankered after, the Lover whom gopa women harvested after a long, sustained, unbroken, dedicated and fervent devotion ! The desire to set their eyes upon Krishna was so intense and compulsive that they suddenly broke off from the tasks in hand and summoning one another rushed to the balconies and other elevated terraces. Their excitement was contagious; they flung aside plates of food of which they just tasted a morsel or two; they sprang from beds on which they rested only a few minutes ago; they left their dressing rooms suddenly without finishing their toilettes; they moved out precipitately leaving the crying children to the care of their astonished husbands. Such was their irresistible urge to have a glimpse of Krishna that they recked not the results of their impulsive withdrawal from daily routine.

When they set their eyes on Krishna from a distance, they expressed their wonder to one another : "Is this the infant that sucked the breasts of Putana and left her dead ? Is this the child that disclosed the entire universe to Yasoda in his pretty mouth ? Is this the thief that stole butter and made neighbours rush at one another's throats by his mischievous pranks ? Is this the charmer who ensnared the hearts of the gopa women and made them desperate for his company ? How fascinating his features, how enchanting his beauty, how marvellous his personality ! Without him, the city turns into a wilderness; without his company, life itself becomes insipid; words which do not speak of him degrade themselves into meaningless chatter of birds; looks which do not rest on him render themselves into vacant stares. How exceptionally fortunate are the gopa women to have had close contact with him — ever thinking of him, singing about him, talking to him, smiling and playing with him, indulging in dalliance with him !

They must have earned this bliss by performing some efficacious rites in their previous lives." The women of the city intently gazed at Krishna, even as they showered flowers and fried paddy (*laajalu*) on him; they drank in his beauty and carried the impression of his charming form into their hearts — never to be erased, never to be forgotten. The Brahmins of the City welcomed the brothers with offerings of fruits, flowers, spices, sandal paste and fragrant unguents; they sprinkled on him rice smeared with turmeric and chanted Vedic benedictions.

V - 32 - (ii) Keeper of the King's wardrobe :

Krishna saw a washerman carrying a load of royal finery clean and well-pressed. Though his place was in the menial service, the dhobi was proud of his connection with the palace; he was the keeper of the King's wardrobe. Krishna informed him that he and his brother were the nephews of the King; that they came to the city on his invitation; that they did not have in their village garments suitable for wear when they had to present themselves before the King; that good would attend on the dhobi if he could spare them some apparel from his pile. The washerman became furious and rated the youth as a swollen-headed rustic who, fattened on butter and cheese, put forward the preposterous claim to royal robes to deck himself with. He further declared that even the mighty kings were terribly afraid of touching even a moiety of Kamsa's possessions and cautioned Krishna that he would be punished with death for this gross impropriety and impudence. Krishna reacted instantaneously to the menial's insult and with a thunderous strike of his hand chopped off his head. The dhobi's companions became panicky and left their burdens and fled for their very lives. Balarama and Krishna picked up from the pile the apparel that suited them and gave some garments to their companions.

V - 32 (iii) The Weaver and the Florist :

As the brothers proceeded further, a weaver recognised them as the sons of Vasudeva, humbly saluted them and offered them soft, multi-coloured robes of fine texture and attractive design and craved for their acceptance. The weaver

decorated the brothers with his precious linen; Krishna was pleased with his devotional service and bestowed upon him great affluence and prosperity. Then they went to the house of the noted florist; Sudama welcomed them, prostrated before them, washed their feet and rendered all the courtesies due to honoured guests. He expressed his joy that by their visit his family was sanctified, his penance bore fruit, his desires were fulfilled, and his home shone with affluence. He acknowledged with gratitude that the lords who took birth to redeem the world of evil forces were pleased to extend their grace to him. He offered them fresh garlands of choice flowers of sweet fragrance. Krishna was touched by the florist's devotion and offered him any boon that he had a mind for. Sudama then prayed to him to confer upon him the gift of eternal service at the Lord's lotus-feet, unbroken friendship with His devotees, and unlimited love for all living creatures. Krishna appreciated his piety and granted his prayer; and he also gave him what he did not ask for — longevity, fame and affluence. The devotee feels content if the Lord gratifies his expressed longings; but the Deity does not feel happy unless He extends His blessings to a wider ambit of things, not thought of by the solicitors of His grace. Such is the amplitude of His mercy and such the intensity of His considerateness !

V - 32 - (iv) The Hunchback :

Proceeding further along the street, the brothers came across a woman, a hunchback, with comely facial features but with a crooked body, carrying a packet of various scented pastes and unguents. Krishna accosted her as 'lotus-eyed beauty', and enquired for whose use she was carrying those fragrant things. The woman replied : "You may be an enchanting youth; but that does not confer on you the right to make fun of those who are not beautiful. How can all people have the claim to beauty ? People call me *Trivakra*, one with a body deformed into three curves; I am in the service of Kamsa; he admires my skill in making these spicy ointments. It is normal for cowherds to put on clothes of coarse linen and rugged wool. Is it proper for you to entertain the wish and to ask for these scents meant for royal use ?" *Trivakra* spoke impulsively out of

pique at Krishna's ridicule of her; but very soon she relented. Her heart melted when she gazed on the beauty of the brothers, their genial looks and smiles and gentle words. The hunchback laid her scented ware before them with love; and they smeared their bodies with the fragrant lotions and ointments and powders. Krishna wished to reward her for her loving offering. He placed his feet on hers and palms around her neck and gently raised her; the crooked frame straightened; her bosom and posteriors took an attractive shape : the misshapen *Trivakra* became transformed into a charming woman, and looked like a veritable arrow from Cupid's quiver. She could not resist the longing for the company of Krishna and clinging to his arm invited him to her house. Krishna gently pushed her aside with an amiable smile and told her not to get hurt in mind if he could not meet her wish at once. He promised to visit her after he fulfilled his dominant mission which had brought him to the city. This episode makes clear that even words uttered by Krishna in a jocular vein will come true. He has called *Trivakra*, a repulsive hunchback, a beauty; and he has justified his appellation by transforming her into an attractive damsel. After the Lord's touch, how can any thing remain ugly and impure ? His words are as true as his touch is efficacious. True to his promise, he pays a visit to her house, after eliminating Kamsa, and makes her happy with his company.

V - 32 - (v) The armoury attacked :

Krishna headed towards Kamsa's armoury, receiving on the way the offerings of the citizens. He found among the various weapons, a massive and mighty bow, resembling Indra's, and approached it with a view to handling it. He laughed aloud when some citizens suggested that he should avoid meddling with it. He lifted the bow lightly with his left hand, tightened the bow-string with perfect ease, and gently twanged it. That small impact was enough to break the bow into halves; and the sound emerging from it was so voluminous, and terrific that it filled all the quarters with reverberations and shattered the haughty self-assurance and complacent composure of Kamsa himself. Thus had Krishna thundered his warning to Kamsa about his impending doom. Hearing the

deafening sound, the guards at the armoury rushed in; they were surprised at the daring act and set upon the brothers to capture them; but Krishna and Balarama, armed with the broken halves of the bow, beat them to death. The hopes of the citizens of redemption from the despotic Kamsa were raised by the exhibition by the brothers of the stuff of which they were made. Enough for the day: they created confidence among the people that their troubles were to end soon; they initiated the war against the evil forces and shook their torpor. They retired to their retreat beyond the city for the night.

V - 32 - (vi) The night :

The sun lost his brilliance as the day waned and he appeared as a sinking crimson ball, while shades of darkness mobilised in all directions. It looked as though the fickle Lady-firmament took a fancy for the mildly radiant youth, the Moon, and administered to the cussed old Sun, a sharp kick which cast him beyond the western horizon. But the Lotus, like the faithful wife, remained true to her lord, the Sun, and closed her petals; she would have nothing to do with the Moon however attractive his qualifications might be. He might be the brother of Lakshmi, the crescent gem adorning the lustrous pile of Siva's locks of hair, the possessor of sixteen phases of radiance (*Shodasakalaas*). But the Lotus remained indifferent. Making common cause with the lotuses, the bees which deemed the Moon as their enemy, sought shelter within their blooms for the night. It was good that the sun's golden chariot disappeared from the sky in time; otherwise, the rapidly chasing sheaves of dark arrows would have shattered it into smithereens by their impetuous impact. Then arose the Moon. Could he be the red vermillion mark on the forehead of the Damsel of East; or the bright sword raised by the Hunter Kaala to slay the Deer of Darkness; or the radiant shoot springing from the eastern branch of the Grand Tree of the Firmament; or the sickle flashed by Cupid to cut asunder the strands of courage of parted lovers? The rise of the mellow Moon was greeted by the sea, swelling high. The Chakoraka birds felt ecstatic, drawing nourishment from the moon-beams. The paramours meeting in secret cursed the Moon as a disturbing

interloper; and the thieves rated him as an enemy to their stratagems which thrive only in darkness. Bathed in the mellow rays of the Lord of the stars, the whole universe looked like a globe of camphor. Krishna and Balarama feasted on milk-pudding and relaxed with their followers in their retreat, enjoying the refreshing moonlight.

Kamsa received reports of the exploits of Balarama and Krishna after they entered the city; he was very much shaken in mind on hearing of their breaking the bow and killing the guards at the armoury. His agitation was so great that he could not command even a wink of sleep. If he closed his ears with his palms, he could not feel the movement of breath within him; when he looked into the waters, his reflected image was devoid of his head; when he gazed at the sky, each star appeared to double itself; when he stood in the light, he found his shadow on the ground to be replete with holes drilled into it. As he looked around, the green trees appeared to shine with a golden hue, His end was drawing near and his mind wandered and wavered. He had visions of inauspicious import : In frightful dreams, he appeared to have gone naked, to have drunk poison, to have mated with ghowls, to have mounted a donkey, to have been anointed with oil, and to have worn a garland of red flowers and gone out alone on a journey without any destination. Fear of death gripped him like a vice. Coming events cast their shadows before.



V - 33. CONFRONTATION IN FULL SWING

V - 33 - (i) Dhanuryaaga celebrations :

As the night waned, the stars on the eastern sky gleamed like rubies; they looked like pearls smeared with blood spilt from frontal globe on the forehead of the elephant of darkness.

by the sharp nails of the lion of dawn. There appeared on the Eastern Mountain, the orb of the Sun, the compound of the essence of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara; the coveted fruit of all the rites performed by the Lotus-damsel; it looked like the mirror fondly held by the Damsel of the Eastern Sky; or, could it be the coral ball suspended by Sachi above the cradle of her infant son; or, the bell in the hands of Bellman of Time tolling the passing of a day in life's duration; or, the Gold Pot raised by Brahma to measure out the piles of longevity of the innumerable living creatures? Dark shades dissipated; cool breezes blew, lotuses bloomed forth, bees whisked about to suck honey; the entire universe shone like a vermilion bowl filled with the emerging sun's crimson rays. The day of reckoning had come !

The Wrestling arena in Mathura Court presented an imposing picture. It was the grand venue of Kamsa's *dhanur-yaaga*. Rocks and shrubs, ant-hills and mounds, were removed over an extensive area; the ground was neatly levelled and made smooth with layers of soft earth. It was made wet with a liberal sprinkling of water scented with musk. It was surrounded by a hedge of sandal trees. In the centre was a raised platform, beautified with flagstaffs, and arches decorated with flowers and festoons; separate stands and galleries were erected to accommodate Brahmins, Kshatriyas and other visitors and citizens. The entire area resounded with blaring trumpets and with the applause of the spectators during jousts and tournaments. The arena resembled the mind of a man of virtue in its purity, evenness and softness. On the raised platform was seated the Bhoja King on a throne; he was attended upon by his ministers and military chiefs and courtiers and vassal chieftains; he was holding court during the *dhanur-yaaga* celebrations. Troops of soldiers had their allotted place at a distance, while competitors in sports and their disciples were assigned coveted space near the royal throne. Heralded by trumpeters, the world-renowned wrestling champions, Chanura and Mushtika, arrived at the arena with a large contingent of their disciples attending upon them. They looked like mighty tuskers returning in triumph after putting to rout all their

opponents in the worlds girt by the seven seas. They went up to the throne and made their obeisances. The King was mightily pleased, Nanda and other vassals laid their tributes and offerings at the throne with due decorum; and with the King's permission occupied the seats allotted to them.

V - 33 - (ii) Kuvalayapeeda :

Krishna and Balarama dressed in sparkling silk and adorned with bright ornaments, blazed forth like celestials. They heard the trumpets proclaiming the advent of the wrestler-champions. The festivities were about to begin. They came to the Main Gate of the lists, only to find the entrance barred by Kuvalayapeeda, the mighty tusker, his fat dripping down the jaws, and feet shaking the earth with fierce stamping. Krishna raised his voice as he called upon the mahout to give up urging the elephant to attack. If he failed to heed the warning, Krishna told him that he would not hesitate to pound him and the elephant with his iron fist and despatch them to the land of the dead. The mahout Ambashtha brought Kuvalayapeeda to the portal, under the King's orders, to see that the elephant would put an end to the brothers. He ignored the warning and goaded the beast to the fight. Krishna lost no time in getting ready to face the challenge. He tightened the purple garment at the waist with the red band; he tucked up his luxuriant pile of hair with a strong ribbon; he brushed aside the curly forelocks and, to the astonishment of the crowd, marched towards the elephant. Goaded and provoked by the mahout, Kuvalayapeeda raged like wood-fire in a fierce gale; he grew in stature and looked like the lord of death; the continuous hum of praise of the grateful bees feeding on his fat, fanned his egotistic pride; and he led the attack with a sudden outburst of deep resounding trumpet. He caught hold of Hari by his trunk and mauled him; but Krishna sprang out, like the sun from the mouth of Rahu, and slunk away between the elephant's legs. Not finding him, the beast became furious, revolved swiftly like Mandara in the Sea of Milk, and catching a glimpse of him turned his trunk and seized him. He raised his trunk and whirling his victim intended to smash him against the ground. At the nick of the moment, Krishna jumped off to the rear of his opponent, caught hold of

his tail and sprang like the eagle-lord Suparna to the front and seized his trunk and kicked him to a distance, equal to twenty-five times the measure of a bow. But the elephant did not give up the fight. He renewed the attack, making several manoeuvres to the left and the right and in a circle; but Krishna managed to keep himself out of reach; and at an opportune moment he sprang on his back; without wasting any more time, he stretched his sledge-hammer hand and dealt fierce blows on the protruding globe of the elephant's forehead. The elephant's head split; pearls stained with blood oozed out of it and spread over the body; they looked like stars on the sky tinged with the red rays of the setting sun. Kuvalayapeeda could no longer sustain himself; he sank down on his knees. But as Krishna jumped off his back, the elephant suddenly sprang to his feet like a mountain, buffeted though by the sinewy waves of the raging sea. He mustered all his strength and made a final attempt to pierce his enemy with his long, mighty, sharp tusks. By deft movements and tactful manipulations Krishna avoided the attack for a time; but when an opportune moment presented itself, he caught hold of the tusks in his iron grips and shook them hard without respite and kicked him all over. The elephant reached the end of his tether; he was thoroughly exhausted; his strength was gone; he lost his nerve; he was on the point of collapse. He looked, in his degradation, like the demon Pura after he was smashed by the battery of Siva's arrows; he resembled a boat shattered by the stormy winds on the sea. His pitiable plight with the loss of dripping fat, recalled to mind the picture of a munificent donor who lost his affluence and turned a miser. Pulled down by mental anguish, caused by defeat, he was like a lover separated from his beloved and suffering harassment at cruel Cupid's hands. Loss of dignity, caused by the immobilisation of his trunk, was similar to the pallor cast on the sun during eclipse. The wounds gaping on his split head presented the spectacle of red lotuses blooming on the rise of the sun. Krishna pressed his foot on the fallen elephant wrenched his strong tusks and whacked him with them repeatedly till life left him. The mahout and his associates met with a similar fate at the hands of Krishna and Balarama,

Kuvalayapeeda, as his very name indicates, is an ever-haunting force of peril to the whole earth. He is the personification of massive malignity and his sole occupation is to destroy everything that is good in the world. He is independent; he acknowledges no superior authority; he is supreme in his own right; he believes he is all in all (*Sarvasvatantrudu*). His position in Kamsa's court is that of an honoured colleague; he stands by Kamsa, of his own free will, and aids him in his evil ventures and upholds his authority. What brings him so close to Kamsa is the identity of interest, common hostility to the Supreme. Self-assurance and self-elation, aggressiveness and stubbornness, urge him to bar Krishna's entry into Mathura fort; and the clash works out to his disastrous end. Kuvalayapeeda represents the attitude of absolute independence of the individual self (*jeevatma*) to act as he pleases, without any reference to the existence of a Supreme Power and the need to conform to its dictates or decrees. Spiritual aspirants will do well to ward off this menace to their progress in their endeavours towards a purer and nobler life.

Now that the passage was clear, Krishna and Balarama proceeded towards the arena, carrying the tusks, the spoils of their triumph, on their shoulders and smiling to the admiring crowds. Krishna was the cynosure of all eyes; there stood at the centre of the stage the hero, a veritable thunderbolt in power for wrestlers, a wonderful and benevolent lord for the masses, an enchanting lover for the ladies, an inescapable chastiser for the stubborn villains, an incarnate Yama for Kamsa, a darling son for the father, a loving protector and god for his kith and kin, a merry companion for the gopa youth, the Supreme Phenomenon of ineffable bliss for the sages, yogis and saints. The fall of Kuvalayapeeda and the triumphant march of the brothers into the wrestling arena sent shivers along the King's spine. The reaction of the people at large was different; it was subdued admiration shared in mutual whispers. They gazed on the lusty adolescents, drank in the nectar of their charming features, mumbled their praises in an undertone, and enjoyed their warm embrace in their fancy. They were certain that the resplendent boys before them were no ordinary human beings though born

as children of Vasudeva, but incarnations of Vishnu's effulgence (*tejas*) descended with purpose to save the world from evil forces. They declared that a review of Krishna's exploits revealed his divinity. The elimination of Putana, Sakatasura, Bakasura and Aghasura, Vatsasura and Kapithasura in infancy and childhood, the lifting of Govardhanagiri, the suppression of Kaliya, the swallowing of wild wood-fire, the liquidation of Kesi, the gratification of the wishes of a large clientele of gopa women — these achievements were unquestionably beyond the competence of human beings. Sure, Krishna was God in human form.

V - 33 - (iii) Chanura and Mushtika :

On seeing Balarama and Krishna at the venue, Chanura accosted them and made certain disparaging observations displaying his self-conceit and vanity and an ill-concealed scorn and contempt for them; "Our great King has come to know from the people that you have, during your rambles in the pastures, grazing cattle, exhibited notable strength and skill in fighting foes. So he has invited you to this wrestling sport. Is it not meet for us to entertain the spectators with a little display of our prowess? Are you sure that you are having strong physique, sound health and competent exercise and skill to enter the lists with me? Or shall we request the King to provide you with nutritious food and invigorating drink to make you fit for the sport? You are not the Sceptre of Yama, nor the Fire in the forehead of Siva nor the Thunderbolt of Indra O Gopa boy, let me caution you that to taste my fist-blow is not so pleasant as to gulp down lumps of butter. Whatever proficiency we have acquired in sports is only to give the King some diversion and pleasure; let us therefore spend a little time in entertaining him with our prowess." This call, penetrated through and through with self-esteem and scorn for the opponent, received a gentle and apparently innocent response from Krishna: "We are boys; we have no regular training and exercise in the art, nor can we claim to be strong; you are experts in wrestling and have hard sinews and imposing physique. We are, as is well-known, no match to you; no, not a whit. Nor can we, by any means, provide amusement to

the King But it is not fair to decline the call and to deny him the pleasure for once. I shall pit myself against you and Balarama will face Mushtika; and we shall try to entertain the King and the spectators to the best of our ability." The self-assurance of Krishna in seeking a duel with Chanura himself, instead of some lesser worthy among his disciples, hurt Chanura's self-importance and provoked him to blow his own trumpet, and warn him of the risk he was asking for by his choice. "Look, boy, you presume to match yourself against me. It is like a puny creature challenging a giant. You know who I am — one of noble descent, of great virtues, of outstanding reputation ! Can you claim parity with me in these qualifications ? To clash with me is an entirely dangerous experiment, quite different from indulging in capers to win the admiration of the village belles. Know that here is Chanura, a warrior without equal, with no adversary worth his steely strength; a hero who sees no reason to admire Siva, who rejects Brahma as of no worth, who ridicules Vishvaksena as presumptuous, who deems Jagatpraana, (*Vaayu, the source of all vitality*), as beneath notice. Note that he accepts any challenge on the spot; there is no question of asking for time; he needs no preparation. Will he be lacking in strength to respond to the call of a churlish cowherd ? It is no boast when I declare that there is no wrestler of any repute in the entire world that has not acknowledged my supremacy, Once you clash with me, there is no escape for you; all your manoeuvres will prove futile. Beware, you cannot then plunge into waters (*Matsya-avataara*); You cannot sink into the sea to support the churning mountain (*Kurma*); you cannot burrow below the earth (*Varaaha*); you cannot assume the form of lion-man (*Narasimha*); for, the moment you stretch your hand, you are undone; there is no scope for your magnifying yourself (*Vaamana*); you cannot venture out on an expedition to massacre kings (*Parasu Rama*); there can be no sojourn for you in the woods, no escape from my scrutiny (*Buddhaavatar*); there can be no chance to shine as a man of extraordinary might and prowess (*Sri Rama*); it is futile to deceive the world with presumptuous prowess (*Balarama*); it is sheer arrogance to expect to govern the world with mischievous manoeuvres (*Krishna*). It is beyond your

competence, Krishna, to face me in fight and hope to escape alive. Be advised and give up your rash intent and impudent attempt. Do you presume to identify yourself with Srihari? Even then, note that this is Mathura and not Vaikuntha to display your glory; this is Kamsa's royal court, not an assembly of liberated souls to show off; what you hear in the arena is the thunder-whack of my arm, not the lilting melody of Narada's veena; what you sport with here is the rocky frame of a wrestler, not the tender build of Lakshmi; this is no grove of Scriptures to loiter about; nor is this a rendezvous of silent meditators to brag of; nor is this the track of devotees to take a leisurely stroll. Beware, Krishna! Now that you are before me, you can find no avenue of escape whatsoever." As Chanura entered the lists, the little tuft of hair on his shaven head appeared like the cloud of smoke emerging from the fire of his fury; his sinewy arms resembled the trunks of the tusked holding the load of the universe; his trimmed whiskers sparkled like the fangs of the Destroyer at the time of dissolution of the worlds; his dark mighty body shone like a granite rock with deep sapphire grain. The earth shook when he stamped on it; the air shuddered as he whacked his arms and thighs with his palms; the vast assemblage shivered with fright as this fierce Goliath moved towards his puny opponent, David. But Krishna proved to be an equal match at the very outset.

The opponents readied themselves for a clash; it was like elephant meeting another elephant, a lion facing another lion, a mountain striking at another mountain. As the fight raged, they appeared to be wild wood-fires coming from opposite directions competing for superiority; they seemed to be thundering clouds settling old scores. They rained blows on each other. Coming close, Krishna raised a shout as he threw his opponent to the ground and jumped to the rear. Chanura appreciated his opponent's trick; he protruded his head towards Krishna's waist and with outstretched hands caught him in his grip and sent him rolling on the earth. But the lad sprang to his feet and resumed the attack with magnified physique. The conflict was full of thrills and suspense; often it looked as though Krishna would lose; but

surprisingly, he extricated himself with timely deftness and stood his ground to the surprise of the spectators. In the course of the fight, Chanura flung Krishna to the ground and pinned him placing his foot on his forehead; but the youth shook him off with a strong kick from the rear, caught him by the feet and felled him to the ground; and then rained blows on his chest with his iron-fist. Chanura managed to free himself from this perilous situation and revolving like the churning Mandara found an opportunity to aim a flash-kick at the opponent. Krishna was alert; he avoided it and springing into the air landed on Chanura's feet and crushed them. Thus the fight became more intense and prolonged as they employed varied manoeuvres and suitable counter-measures and drew blank, with neither gaining a definite advantage. The contest between Balabhadra and Mushtika was equally tense with stakes of victory equally drawn.

V - 33 - (iv) The audience reaction :

That the gopa heroes could keep their renowned contestants at bay so long, was itself a matter for adulation among the onlookers. The sympathies of the audience swayed towards the young heroes; the ladies of the city in particular felt very much upset by the trend of the unequal fight and wished that better counsels prevailed to bring it to a halt. They discussed, in little groups, their King's unfair role in permitting such duels : "Here are young boys of delicate features made to pit themselves against rugged giants with wicked hearts; and the King looks on with smiling unconcern as the unequal fight goes on. He does not raise his little finger to stop it. Has such cruelty been witnessed ever before ? How is it that none in his court points out this flagrant injustice and suggests to the King to terminate it ? How cruel ! Had we been bamboo-reeds, Madhava would have treated us to the nectar of his nether-lip; had we been peacocks, he would have made friends with us by sporting our feathers on his head-gear; had we been pieces of purple silk, he would have pleased us by wearing us around his waist; had we been aromatic leaves and scented flowers, he would have honoured us as a garland decorating his chest; had we been trees in Brindavana, he would have given us

comfort by playing in our shades. How very unfortunate are we that we have failed to observe suitable rites in our past lives to become any of them in our present lives? Cruel is Brahma in ordaining our birth in this city? Had he been considerate to us and made us the womenfolk of Brindavana, how pleasant our lives would have turned with the privileged company of this enchanting youth? We know not what merit the people of Nandavraja have earned to deserve the exhilarating bliss of unbroken association with Krishna." The city-ladies thus envied the good luck that attended on the residents of Nandavraja. At the same time, they thanked their stars for giving them at least a few glimpses of Krishna, the magnetic and radiant youth, enlivening the arena with his daring feats. The face of Krishna embellished with pearly beads of sweat resembled a full-blown lotus bedecked with fresh drops of dew. There was a feeling of guilt among the onlookers that having chosen to attend the show and having observed the glaring unfairness of the contest they had failed of their duty to *point it out*, even if they would not be able to rectify it.

V - 33 - (v) The end of the Court-wrestlers :

The wrestling bout continued unabated. But there were definite signs of the waning of the strength of the wrestlers of the Court. Chanura was caught in the grip of Krishna; but he mustered all his declining strength into a powerful blow aimed at his adversary's chest. Krishna did not swerve a bit; its impact appeared to him light, as that of a blow with a cluster of flowers. Krishna thought that they were too long at the sport; and it was time he had clinched it. Fury seized him as he snatched the enemy's hands; he twisted them rearwards; and lifting his body whirled it and dashed it against the ground. Blood gushed out of Chanura's mouth; and wriggling for a while and gasping for breath, Chanura lay stretched full length on the ground; and Death claimed him as his own. The same fate waited upon Mushtika at Balabhadra's hands. As Krishna looked on, Balarama flared up, bundled up Mushtika in his mighty grip, and swinging his body to gain momentum smashed it against the ground. Mushtika fell like a tree uprooted in a fierce gale; spitting blood he breathed his last. Seeing the

fate of the Court-wrestlers, their disciples sprang into the arena and set upon Balarama as the collective target. But he proved more than a match for them; making a liberal use of his fists and legs, he despatched them in a few minutes to the land of the dead. The rest of the retinue fled panic-stricken. Consternation seized the King.

It is said that Chanura and Mushtika represent inseparable twin qualities (*dvandvas*), pairs of correlatives, like hunger and thirst (*aakali dappikalu*) infatuation and grief (*soka-mohamulu*), ripe old age and death (*jaraamrityuvulu*). Chanura is more aggressive; he speaks for both; and Mushtika passively nods his assent. Chanura is provoking Hunger; and Mushtika, like Thirst, remains content in the background. Chanura is Fond Attachment and Mushtika attends on him as Grief. Chanura is annoying Old Age and Mushtika crawls after him in the dark as Death. They stand united as staunch sentinels and support Kaama (*Desire*) which Kamsa personifies. They are of the earth, earthy; they are interested only in worldly concerns; and they feel happy to remain steady with one who satisfies their craze for sensual pleasures, affluence and fame. They are unaffected by consideration of spiritual well-being; and so find Kamsa's court congenial to their activities. The two wrestlers have established reputation for their power and prowess, agility and adroitness, resilience and resourcefulness, in tackling their enemies and putting them to rout with perfect ease and expedition. They consider their young contenders as rustic bumpkins, unfamiliar with the niceties of the art of wrestling. But they soon realise how woefully mistaken they are in their judgment and expend every ounce of their energy and put to use every device they have mastered, to overcome Krishna and Balarama. They fail miserably as they are pitted against the Divine forces. Overweening arrogance meets with unexpected drubbing and disgraceful death at the hands of quiet equipoise and confident strength.

Kaama (*desire*) and Krodha (*anger*), Lobha (*greed*) and Moha (*attachment*), Mada (*arrogance*) and Maatsarya (*jealousy*) are pairs of correlatives, which are closely allied with mutual links and present a formidable obstacle to aspirants of spiritual

life. Desires are endless; and even if one of them gets foiled, anger rages in the mind and strives to wreak vengeance against the agent causing that frustration. Greed pursues a multiplicity of desires without intermission and develops such infatuation for the objects thus achieved, that any loss of the coveted possessions brings acute grief in its wake. Noble descent, beauty of features, vast scholarship, abundant wealth, enormous power, generate overweening arrogance, which cannot tolerate similar accomplishments in others. Jealousy steps in and warps and twists the very merits of the opponents into glaring lapses which deserve condemnation. Chanura and Mushtika expose, by their coarse bearing, haughty words and violent actions, how deeply they are under the nasty influence of these pairs of correlatives. It is upto spiritual aspirants to overcome these hostile factors; unless they accomplish this, they cannot reach a state of calm sobriety and steady contemplation, which are essential for spiritual growth (*dvandvaateeta stiti*). They can hope to eliminate these inimical influences, only by invoking the gracious intervention of the Supreme Lord.



V - 34. LIQUIDATION OF KAMSA

V - 34 - (i) The desperate tyrant

The wheel had come full circle. Kamsa's strategy failed completely. He invited Krishna and Balarama to Mathura to put an end to them. The tusker, Kuvalayapeeda, the wrestlers Chanura and Mushtika, on whom he counted for eliminating the brothers proved unequal to the task. Though the odds were totally against them, the brothers managed to win the laurels. The assembled crowds admired and praised them, the Brahmins showered blessings on them, Nanda and other gopas were beside themselves with joy. In the entire Court, there was one, only one, who felt exceedingly miserable — and that wa-

Kamsa. He was the mainstay of the demoniac forces; he was the manipulator of all evil designs to secure the liquidation of Krishna even in infancy and childhood: Putana, Sakatasura, Trinavarta, Vatsasura, Bakasura and a host of other wicked monsters were commissioned by him to accomplish that purpose; he was the unscrupulous villain who dethroned and imprisoned his father Ugrasena; he was the merciless murderer of the children of Devaki and Vasudeva whom he cast into prison. By inviting Krishna and Balarama to Mathura he had unwittingly hastened his own ruin. Kamsa now saw the writing on the wall. But he ignored it out of sheer obstinacy. Or, perhaps, his self-conceitedness, his over-confidence, made him think that he would succeed where his doughty lieutenants failed. Or, now that he had come to the end of his tether, mere desperation drove him to make the last effort to establish control over the situation. The day of reckoning had arrived.

V - 34 - (ii) Direct attack : Kamsa falls :

Kamsa ordered his ministers and commanders of his armies to chase the brothers out of the city, to take the traitor, Nanda, and his people captive, to put an end to Vasudeva and not to spare Ugrasena as he was no father but a confidant and close associate of his enemies. Krishna thought that the only way to nullify his commands was by bearding the lion in his own den. He sprang to the platform and rushed towards the throne, even as the citizens shivered at his audacity. Kamsa was furious; he plucked his sword from the sheath, ready to face him and finish him. The courtiers hailed their King as the mightiest of all heroes and wished him success. This was the hour of direct confrontation, which Kamsa had avoided till then and which Krishna was looking forward to all along. Krishna swooped on Kamsa, as an eagle on a serpent, seized him by his hair and pulled him into the arena as the pearls and diamonds adorning his person dropped like stars at the termination of an aeon (*kalpa*). With an amazing fury Krishna attacked his enemy, giving him no chance to retaliate, and flung him to the ground with such force that the King lay flat, motionless, dead. Krishna raised a cry of victory as he dragged the

villain with his powerful hands, in the same way as the lion would an elephant. Strange to behold ! The soul of Kamsa like a shimmering light merged into Krishna. Though his approach was that of an enemy, Kamsa was ever occupied with thoughts of Krishna without intermission — awake or asleep, eating or drinking, in moods of joy or rage. It was uninterrupted absorption in thoughts of Hari that secured for him this privilege of union with Him.

The brothers of Kamsa, Nyagrodha and Gahva, were shocked; they prepared to attack the gopa brothers. But Balarama mounted an elephant, armed with a club, and wielding the weapon with tremendous force dealt severe blows on his opponents and despatched them to the land of the dead. Narada floating on the air tuned his Veena for hymns in praise of Krishna; Brahma and Siva rained flowers on him glorifying his victory; the celestials blew their trumpets and their damsels danced in joy. Meanwhile, Kamsa's wives rushed out of their apartments wailing loud, beating their heads with their hands and shedding profuse tears; and reaching the arena, they clasped their dead husband to their bosoms in utter agony. They lamented that Kamsa did not pay heed to the well-meant advice that he should make peace with Krishna, even because all those who were entrusted with the task of putting an end to Krishna suffered death at his hands. They wept that as a result of this intransigence and of his accumulated acts of wickedness against living creatures, he had to meet this miserable fate. The angry lion laid the elephant low; the fierce gale uprooted the tree; the furious sea-tide swallowed up the island; the blazing thunderbolt smashed the mountain; and the infuriated Krishna wrenched the life of Kamsa in a swift and sudden swoop. The wives of Kamsa raved in grief that their stony hearts did not break even after they witnessed their lord's sudden surprising fall. Krishna assuaged their sorrow with his words of sympathy and comfort.

V - 34 - (iii) Kamsa's nature analysed :

It will be of interest to explore the nature and role of Kamsa, for the wholesome lessons spiritual aspirants can draw

for their own benefit. Kamsa is Desire (*Kaama*) in all its intensities and ramifications; he is Egoism (*Ahamkaara*) in all its aspects and aberrations; he is Tyranny (*Duraagraha*) in all its expressions of subjugation, torture and wickedness. He is a clod compounded of the characteristic qualities of *tamas* and *rajas* in their pronounced form, undisturbed by any spark of *sattva*. Fear and suspicion drive him to employ cruel methods which result in great suffering even for close kith and kin: Vasudeva and Devaki are thrown into shackles; their infants are put to the sword; Yadava suspects are exiled. Kamsa out-Herods Herod in ordering a general massacre of infants. A succession of wicked demons descend on Vrepalle at the instance of their master to put an end to Krishna; but meet with miserable failure and fatal end. Sane counsel is stifled; adulation tastes sweet; sycophancy rules the roost in the tyrant's court. Kamsa's egoistic vanity does not allow him to learn from experience. He has ample resources at his command; he employs the mild suave Akrura to inveigle Krishna and Balarama into the Mathura court on the pretext of an invitation to Dhanuryaaga. Egoism makes no bones of pressing treachery into service to gain its ends. Kamsa depends on Kuvalayapeeda to liquidate his enemy at the portal of the fort. Massive malignity, staunch supporter of aggressive vanity, suffers a miserable collapse in an assault by the Supreme Good. The second line of offence, the twin wrestler-stalwarts, Chanura and Mushtika, enter the lists and challenge the brothers for a bout, to provide a little entertainment to the King. Kamsa fails to see the writing on the wall. Pig-headed reliance on over-confident and aggressive stalwart-pair results in an astounding blow; the props fall, as fortune smiles on the rustic champions. Kamsa's calculations go awry. With the massive swollen-headed *tamoguna* (Kuvalayapeeda) smashed, with the abrasive, aggressive *rajoguna* (Chanura and Mushtika) demolished, *Kaama* (Kamsa) inordinate Desire for power and pelf, domain and domination, stands alone, weak, helpless, desperate. Even though beaten thoroughly, *Kaama* refuses to own defeat. It makes a last-ditch attempt to re-establish its position by threatening rant and deafening bluster; but it is instantaneously blasted into silence.

Kamsa represents the Mind; the senses drag the Mind along activities which bring about its devastation; as it is alienated from spirit, it remains a helpless slave to carnal delights. Kamsa is Kaama; and Desire is hydra-headed. If one wish is satisfied, another wish sprouts in its place; there is no end to the succession of desires; there is no point where satiety is reached. It is an inexorable enemy to spiritual well-being and it is extremely difficult to overcome it (*Kaama roopam duraasadam*). Only a *mahaabaaho*, a person with hefty hands, can demolish it. All the heads of the Hydra should be crushed at one swoop; and that feat could be accomplished only by the Supreme Person. That is exactly what Krishna had done; he has plunged on the throne, dragged Kamsa into the arena, attacked him in a mad frenzy and flung him with such mighty force, that the King lies flat, motionless, dead. Thus the Lord has put an end to Desire when it has lost its moorings and strayed into ways of violence and wickedness and attempted to destroy everything which is right and good. Desire becomes commendable only if it orients itself to God; then it promotes virtue and conduces to peace on earth and goodwill among men.

V - 34 - (iv) Krishna's tactics in meeting challenges :

It is interesting to note the way Krishna reacts to the various dangers to which he has been exposed from his infancy. With the innocence of a little babe in swaddling clothes, he suckles Pootana's breasts and sucks her life; he kicks up his slender legs and smashes Sakataasura to pieces; he allows the whirlwind Trinaavarta to carry him aloft, only to pull him down to death with his ponderous weight. As a boy, he hits two birds at one shot : he bundles up Vatsaasura and hurls him at Kapithaasura, a sport which results in the death of both. With apparent credulity he approaches the wily Bakaasura and when he draws him into his beak sticks in his throat, stops his breathing and leaves him dead. The same fate awaits Aghaasura at his hands. Krishna faces these hostile demons with sportive ease but shows no consideration and eliminates them. Thus does he administer a warning to their leader that a similar fate overtakes him if he pursues this suicidal hostility. But an

overbearing tyrant does not heed it; he makes light of it, relying on yet untapped resources of might and power. He presumptuously extends an invitation to his enemies to participate in the festivities of Dhanuryaaga and makes sure that it is accepted, by employing a gentle, soft-spoken emissary, who is held in universal esteem. When attempts at liquidation of the enemy by demoniac agents have failed, he has changed his tactics and used guile to inveigle the gopa brothers into the snare designed by him to perfection at Matura. Kuvalaya-peeda, the cruel mighty tusker, is his vanguard of offence at the portal of his palace. Chanura and Mushtika, the renowned wrestlers of unchallengeable prowess are his second line of attack. Kamsa believes that it is impossible for Krishna and Balarama to escape their wrath in fight. He is right in his estimate of his doughty champions. They are loyal to him and they put every ounce of their strength and skill in their battle with Kamsa's enemies. That is why it takes a long time for Krishna to overcome them; he has to strain every nerve, he has to draw upon his resourcefulness and manoeuvring capacities in facing them in combat; it is no child's play for him in these encounters. Krishna thus seems to justify Kamsa's trust in his formidable lieutenants. Now it is Kamsa's turn to stand up to Krishna. He is the arch-villain, the main perpetrator of evil designs, tyrant and murderer, King and Commander : and quite naturally, he is expected to offer a grim challenging fight. But nothing of the type happens. Kamsa has become demoralised. The enemy whom he has feared has demolished his hopes by doing away with his trusted lieutenants. He feels nervous about his survival. But despair drives the tyrant to reckless aggressiveness in a bid to retain his sovereignty. Even as he issues his commands to his armies to kill his father and Vasudeva and Nanda, proclaiming them traitors, and to take Krishna and Balarama and gopas as captives, Krishna springs on to the platform, drags the King by his hair from the throne and flings him dead on the arena. The situation has reached the climax; it demands instantaneous reprisal; and Krishna meets it with superb agility and supreme prowess and speedy despatch. It is said that it is unwise to leave unpaid even a moiety of debt; for it tends to multiply itself in time. Similarly,

it is impolitic to allow even a single enemy to survive, for he poses danger as a formidable adversary as time passes. Krishna adheres to the sound principle of eliminating enemies without mercy as and when they present themselves. The purpose of this incarnation is to redeem the world of the demoniac elements and provide protection to the virtuous and the good.

(Paritraanaaya sadhoonaam Vinaasaayacha dushkritaam)



V - 35. MATHURA AFTER KAMSA

V - 35 - (1) Vasudeva and Devaki released from prison :

Krishna and Balarama ordered that arrangements be made for the cremation of and observance of funeral rites for Kamsa and other fallen heroes. They then hastened to the prison and released Vasudeva and Devaki from it and prostrated before them. At the time the parents were entertaining the idea that the brothers were supreme celestial lords and not their children, Krishna threw a mysterious illusion over them and erased that impression. After making humble obeisances to Devaki and Vasudeva along with Balarama, Krishna moved their hearts with his sweet observations : "Dear parents, you have given us birth but you have been denied, by providential ordination, the privilege of rearing us and enjoying our little innocent smiles and prattle of our infancy, and sportive pranks of our childhood and boyhood. We, on our side, have lost the precious prerogative of coveted fondling of the parents all these years in the various stages and vicissitudes of our growth and well-being. Even a hundred years will be found inadequate to discharge our obligations to you, who have gifted us these bodies, the very implements needed to attend to and accomplish the four objectives of life — *dharma, artha, kaama* and *moksha*. However exalted and competent a person may be, however vast and varied his talents and affluence may be, he counts for nought and even degrades himself to the position of a vile ingrate and sinner, if he does not employ them in the

service of his parents, his wife and children, kith and kin, preceptors and other righteous and saintly persons and folks in dire need. Such a person is no better than a living corpse. It is on our account that Kamsa has cast you into prison and subjected you to unbearable humiliation and suffering. We are aware of this; we have the strength to redeem you of this miserable plight; and yet, we have stayed away from discharging our primary duty of effecting your rescue. How callous and unnatural, how cruel and ungracious, has been our conduct all these years ! We humble ourselves before you and pray that you will, in the plenitude of your love and fortitude, ignore our lapses and forgive us."

Krishna's sweet words were a soothing balm to the bruised hearts of the parents. Vasudeva and Devaki drew them close to their hearts and wrapped them in a warm embrace and drenched them with tears of overflowing joy. The excitement of the moment left them tongue-tied.

V - 35 - (2) Ugrasena enthroned :

Krishna turned to Ugrasena and requested him to resume the throne : "O Sinless One, Yadavas are prohibited, under Yayati's curse, from occupying the throne; it is meet that you should accept the responsibility and resume sovereign power. The celestials themselves pay court to you; how easy then for you to command the services of earthly chiefs !" The elevation of the humiliated Ugrasena to the throne received universal acclaim for he was known for his great piety, adherence to truth and righteousness, liberal munificence, and remarkable prowess on the field of battle, a veritable terror to the adversaries. With the fall of Kamsa, conditions at Mathura became congenial to the return of the fugitives belonging to the various clans, Yadu, Vrishni, Bhoja, Marut, Kukura, Andhaka etc. Krishna welcomed them home and rehabilitated them by restoring to them the properties, confiscated by Kamsa when they fled in panic at his atrocities.

V - 35 - (3) Farewell to Nanda :

Krishna then bade a touching farewell to Nanda : "Dear father, we know not our father, we have no idea of our mother;

we have deemed you as our father and Yasodadevi as our mother; we know of no parents who have brought up their children with such fond love and yearning solicitude as you have shown in rearing us. If we are what we are today, we owe our position entirely to your gracious efforts in our upbringing. We have to stay on for some time to see to the settlement of the affairs in Mathura. Let it be known to our folks in the Vraja that, wherever we be, our minds remain oriented towards them and we deeply cherish all their fond words and loving deeds in our favour." Krishna and Balarama honoured their foster parents with clothes and ornaments, embraced them and bade them farewell. Nanda, Yasoda and the other gopas were overwhelmed with grief at their parting and wended their way homewards with heavy hearts.

Partings are painful when they happen even among haphazard acquaintances and casual associates. But here is a tense situation when loving parents, who have fondled and brought up foster children with care and solicitude and wondered at their miraculous exploits and mysterious powers, are to part from their beloved ones. Necessarily, the parting acquires poignancy, particularly when the prospect of contact, much less of companionship, appears so remote. The assurance that the brothers carry happy memories of close affinities with them and their comrades does not assuage the misery but only accentuates the anguish. Krishna and Balarama are divine incarnations; they can freely enjoy intimate fellowship with their kith and kin when they are in their presence; and feel unconcerned and detached without any trace of unhappiness in their absence. Such equipoise in attachment and in detachment is hard to come by among human beings. Hence the need for recourse to vivid recapitulation of pleasant experiences and re-living the past with avid enthusiasm. The denizens of Nandavraja are left with this choice to revivify and revitalise their past experiences and sustain their lives in the absence of their lord and protector.



EPILOGUE

RUKMINI KALYANAM

Bhishmaka, the King of Vidarbha, was famous for his courage, prowess and righteousness. He had five sons — Rukmi, Rukmaratha, Rukmabaahu, Rukmakesa and Rukma-maali — and a daughter, Rukmini, the youngest of all the children. With the birth of Rukmini, the King's palace acquired a glow similar to the one that western sky receives on the rise of the moon. As the child grew, her form and features took on a new brightness and attractiveness, like the moon in the bright fortnight. She would join girls of her age in sports, pastimes and amusements; and impart cheer and joy to the company all around. She was the cynosure of all eyes, whatever be the sport she was indulging in. She enjoyed participation in marriages of male and female toys and in feasts arranged to celebrate those occasions; she took delight in tending and watering the flowering plants and creepers in the gardens; she rejoiced in the vigorous sport of swinging in cradles of gold, suspended from ceilings in halls; she found a pleasant diversion in making parrots and sarikas (*gorinkas*) speak as she spoke; she rejoiced in teaching the swans varieties of graceful gait, and in instructing the peacocks in attractive dance-patterns and poses. As Rukmini passed through the period of adolescence, her stature grew tall, her face bloomed like a lotus, her bosom gained prominence, her tresses shone luxuriant, and her waist looked slender. Inexplicably, this natural and instinctive change in her physical conditions corresponded to simultaneous reactions in Krishna's mind; the emergence of an amorous desire, the blossoming of love, the hankering after a lovable mate, the accentuation of longing for companionship and a streak of uncertainty about finding a worthy soul-filling help-meet. Rukmini heard reports, made by visitors at her father's court about Krishna's charming features, great prowess and outstanding virtues; and she felt that he would prove a worthy husband for her. In a similar way, from what he learnt about the magnetic charms of Rukmini, of her features, mind and intellect, and her inherent

virtues and excellent character, Krishna determined that she should fill the place of the beloved and esteemed Queen-Eminent (*Pattamahishi*).

Though Krishna and Rukmini did not see each other, they relied upon reports reaching them about each other; they fell in love with each other; and they resolved to get united in wedlock. There was no direct meeting where they could see, and talk to, and form impressions about, each other. Strange that they should come to such firm conclusions in which their precious lives were to be involved, without any preliminary precautions ! But they knew what they heard was true; the reporters were upright, honourable men who had no axe to grind and so could be implicitly trusted. There seemed to be an unseen telepathic force at work, linking their souls in love and leading to the auspicious culmination in their union.

True love would not be allowed to run smooth. Its path was strewn with thorns, brambles and bushes; and Rukmini was prepared to stand the test even at the risk of her life. Bhishmaka came to know of his daughter's inclination; he was pleased with her choice; he consulted his close kin and advisers; they expressed their agreement with him and hailed the proposal. But stiff resistance to it came from no other than Rukmi, the eldest prince, who had developed contempt for, and hostility to, Krishna. He was closely associated with the inveterate enemies of Krishna like Jaraasandha, Saalwa, Dantavakra, Poundraka, Sisupaala and others. He was determined that his sister should be married to Sisupaala and to none else. None in the Vidarbha court, not even the King, dared to cross swords with the Prince and champion Rukmini's cause. The situation was fast developing into a crisis for Rukmini; she was miserable. There seemed to be no way of escape from the tragedy of having to marry an unwanted, detested claimant for her hand.

Then it struck Rukmini in a flash that she would convey a message to Krishna how tragic her plight was and how immediate the need for her rescue was. She wanted some one who could impress on Krishna how deeply she loved him and

persuade him to hasten to Vidarbha to carry her off before it was too late. To this end, she counted upon the good offices of a Brahmin whose solicitude for her happiness was immense and genuine. The sagacious messenger made an expeditious journey to Dwaraka and managed to get audience with Krishna. On seeing him, he pronounced his benediction that he should soon become a groom, as his marriage was almost imminent. Krishna was pleased; he received the Brahmin and extended to him all the honours due to a distinguished guest. He praised the Brahmins who devoted themselves to the discharge of their duties with earnestness, selflessness and cheerfulness; he esteemed their sense of contentment with whatever little that fell to their lot unsolicited; he revered them for their simplicity, guilelessness, humility and goodwill for others. Krishna deemed that the messenger before him deserved all respect as he was one of the finest representatives of his community. Then he enquired to which Kingdom he belonged and under whose rule he lived and what purpose brought him to Dwaraka and in which way he could be of help to him. The messenger briefly stated that he hailed from Vidarbha, and that their King Bhishmaka enjoyed popular esteem. Then he came to the point and said that he brought a message from the Princess, Rukmini, who was deeply in love with Krishna.

The Brahmin seemed to be an adept negotiator, a seasoned ambassador. His approach should be such as to excite Krishna's interest in Rukmini. So he thought it proper to convey the message in her words : "O Lord, pray, listen to the entreaty of a humble girl who has lost her heart to you. The moment ears catch the praise of your attributes, all bodily tribulations cease; whenever the eyes glimpse your beautiful figure, all wishes find instantaneous fulfilment; whosoever prostrates at your auspicious feet achieves distinction in the world's esteem; whosoever chants your sacred name with devotion gets released from worldly shackles. It is to such a glorious person that my soul is committed in love and devotion. Could there be any one equal to you in descent, figure, features, youthfulness, strength and prowess, righteousness, virtues, gracefulness and mercifulness? No wonder that girls

everywhere aspire for your hand in marriage. I am not the first person to come under your spell. Has not Lakshmi become infatuated with you earlier ? I am yours, body, mind, heart and soul. But the Prince of Chedi, the meanest among the mean, has, in his arrogance, planned to wrest me away from you, knowing well that I have consecrated myself to your service. Fool that he is, he has no idea of your superb strength and martial prowess. If I have in my previous births performed worship to the deities and rendered services to preceptors and elders and made charities to the poor and the needy with the sole object of securing the Supreme Hari for husband, may my aspiration be fulfilled with Krishna becoming the lord of my life. I am sure that Sisupala and his wicked friends will suffer a humiliating defeat at your hands. I earnestly beseech you to speed to Vidarbha, to rout the enemy hosts and make me your wife. If you consider that forcing your way into the palace involves the elimination of guards and my kinsmen, which may appear repulsive to you, I suggest an alternative course for adoption. It is customary for the bride to worship Gowri, our family deity, before the wedding; and her shrine is situated outside the city. May I request you to capture me there and carry me off ? Sages and saints aspire for a bath in the sacred waters emerging from your feet in order that their ignorance is eliminated and sins expiated. If you do not show mercy, I am undone. Let me assure you that the only course left open to me then is to give up my life with my mind fixed on you in unbroken contemplation. Of what use are my ears if they cannot drink in the nectar of your sweet words ? Of what charm is this beautiful body if it does not lend itself to your enjoyment ? What for are my sparkling eyes if they cannot rest their glances on your charming figure ? What for are my delicious coral lips if they fail to join yours in blissful kiss ? What pleasure does my delicate well-shaped nose give me if it cannot inhale the fragrance of your garlands of never-fading flowers ? Life that is not consecrated to your service is worse than death. Beloved Lord, with all the earnestness at my command I implore your mercy and entreat you to rescue me from this critical situations."

The message and the appeal of Rukmini conform in spirit to the Gita injunction that a devotee should give up all means of spiritual approach (*karma*, *jnana*, and *bhakti*) and make a total surrender at the Lord's feet (*saranaagati*) and that the Lord will Himself effect his redemption from all sins, (*Sarvadharmān parityajya, mamekam saranam vraja, ahamtva sarva papābhya, moksha ishyaami ma suchah*) This implies that the devotee should renounce the egoistic idea that he is independent (*swatantra*), that he is the doer (*karta*), the enjoyer (*bhokta*), the master (*swami*); but consider himself as an instrument in God's hands, carrying out His commands for His pleasure and glory. It is this total renunciation of 'I' and 'mine' (*ahamkaara* and *mamakaara*) and acceptance of 'He' and 'His' in a spirit of humility that makes the devotee God's own possession (*sottu*); and then the responsibility of looking after what is His own devolves on the Supreme Himself. What Rukmini conveys to Krishna is exactly this; that she is his, that she is entirely dependent on him (*paratantra*) and that he is her only refuge; and that it is upto him to discharge his commitment that none who seeks protection from him fails to get it. It looks as though he is only waiting for such an agonising summons and makes haste to effect her rescue from the mortal crisis that she faces. Rukmini reaches the culmination in devotion (*bhakti*) in donating herself to Krishna and in waiting trustfully for his advent to claim her for his own. It is interesting to note, in this context, that Rama goes all the way to Mithila, proves his worth by stringing Siva's bow, and wins Sita for bride; and the initiative for this consummation has rested with Viswamitra. Could this be taken to imply that Sita, like Janaka, is a *jnani* and that the Lord, who identifies Himself with *jnanis*, goes, of His own accord, to forge kinship with her? But here Rukmini takes the initiative and *summons* Krishna, through Agnidyota, to go to Kundinapuri and *carry her off* as his bride. Evidently, though the Lord appreciates the depth of the love (*bhakti*) of a devotee, He moves not until the latter knocks at His door, imploring pity and urging redemption.

The Brahmin messenger cleverly dovetailed in this submission of Rukmini, her appreciation of Krishna's charms and virtues, her faith in his invincible heroism, her apprehension of

his divine stature and graciousness, her intense love for, and total surrender to, him as her All-in-all and Supreme Lord. He ended it with a piteous appeal for immediate intervention and rescue. The sagacious emissary added his own persuasive post-script, impressing on Krishna how worthy the princess was of his attention and care. He painted a fascinating picture of Rukmini's lovely features and lively charms. Her feet had the tenderness of the unfolding leaves; her thighs resembled plantain-trunks; her hands glowed like the redrays of the setting sun; her neck had the beauty of a conch; her waist was so slender that it was difficult to say whether it was a distinct part of the body or not; her forehead was a bright crescent; her eyes were lotus-petals; her prominent bosom excited passion; her luxuriant locks of hair suggested a collection of dark bees; her arched brows brought to mind the bent bow of Cupid; her darting glances were the veritable shafts of the lord of love; her sweet words were a feast to the mind; her face beamed like the mellow full moon. The Brahmin expressed his opinion that Krishna and Rukmini were made for each other; that their marriage was a certainty and they had the benediction of all those who wished them well. Krishna heard the Brahmin's recital of Rukmini's message and his winding up exhortation and benediction with patient attention and inward happiness. He smiled as he took the Brahmin's hand in his and then revealed his own feelings of intense love for, and attachment to, the princess. Thoughts of Rukmini, he said, made him spend sleepless nights. He declared that he also knew how Rukmi, out of his hatred of Krishna, raised objections to the proposal and worked vigorously against its execution. He assured the Brahmin that he would rout the enemies and rescue the princess and make her his wife. Krishna summoned his charioteer and told him to get ready to go to Vidarbha. Horses of noble breed, noted for speed and endurance — Saitya, Sugriva, Meghapushpa and Valahaka — were harnessed to the chariot; Krishna mounted the chariot with the good messenger and journeyed the whole night to reach Vidarbha in time to avert the catastrophe. Balarama came to know of Krishna's departure for Kundinapuri; he mobilised the army and followed him to be by his side in this adventure.

It would be worthwhile to consider why Krishna, who loved Rukmini and who knew that Rukmi was standing between him and his beloved, did not himself take the initiative and carried her off earlier. He could have managed it with ease. For one thing, such a course might appear to be clandestine abduction, even if the lady was eager to cooperate with him. Secondly, it would smack of hastiness on his part to force the issue; for, he did not know how far Rukmini was prepared to sunder her relationships with her parents by this audacious step. Thirdly, it was wisdom for even a zealous lover to wait for news about his beloved's inclinations towards him and to what extent her love for him could go to defy parental persuasion and, more importantly, fraternal command. When the messenger explained the actual position and supported the appeal of Rukmini to rescue her from the crisis (failing which there was the danger of her courting death in preference to marriage with detested Sisupala), there was nothing to keep Krishna back; he rushed into action. He could now capture his precious treasure openly and challenge the assembled princes to resist him if they could. That was the manly course approved by tradition, for royal youth to adopt in claiming their beloved damsels and making them their own. By taking recourse to this strategy of mingled romance and chivalry, Krishna had the opportunity to prove that Rukmini's trust in his strength and prowess, as more than a match for the combined resources of all his enemies put together, was not ill-founded; and thus establish his position in her heart both as lover and hero without an equal. Be it noted that on the spiritual plane the devotee's cry of anguish would meet with an instantaneous response from the ever gracious and all-merciful Supreme Lord.

Elaborate arrangements, under Rukmi's direction, were made for the marriage of Rukmini with Sisupala. The capital of Vidarbha wore a festive appearance; the streets and houses were beautifully decorated with flags and festoons; men and women appeared in their choice attire and finery; and musicians filled the air with their melodious strains and songs. Bhishmaka performed rituals to propitiate the manes and

feasted the Brahmins and gave them gifts. After taking the purificatory bath, Rukmini was dressed in fine silk and adorned with ornaments of gold and gems; amidst the chant of Vedic incantations, an auspicious thread dyed in turmeric was fastened to her wrist and she was thus given the bridal status; the family-priest made offerings to the fire at the altar; the royal couple made liberal gifts to Brahmins on a large scale. The preliminaries to the wedding were nearing completion. Sisupala arrived with all his kith and kin and retinue, proud and haughty, his heart cheered with certainty of winning the bride. His bosom-friends, Jarasandha, Salva, Dantavakra, Poundraka and company came to witness the wedding; they brought with them their armies with determination to rout Krishna and Balabhadra and their armies, should they pose any obstruction to the smooth solemnisation of Sisupala's marital alliance with Rukmini. Bhishmaka welcomed Sisupala with all the honours due to a bridegroom and accompanied him to the mansion allotted to him. Other princes, invited to the celebration, were warmly received and conducted to their lodges.

There was one, and only one, who kept aloof from this excitement and rejoicing; and that was the bride Rukmini. Though she mechanically went through the preliminary ceremonies, her mind was elsewhere. She was passing through a turmoil of anxiety and suspense. Her thoughts ran thus : "The marriage is fixed for tomorrow; and there is no word from Krishna in reply. How is it that the venerable Brahmin, Agnidyota, has delayed his return ? Could he have suffered a set back on his journey to Dwaraka out of fatigue ? Or could Krishna have rejected my proposal as repugnant to the code of conduct ? Or could Krishna have been moved by pity and is on the way here ? I do not know whether he has reacted favourably or not. My fate hangs in the balance. I do not know what is in store for me. There is no knowing how Gauri, the family deity, views my perilous situation. I depend on Her grace for protection. In case the Brahmin has failed to reach Dwaraka, Krishna may not, on his own initiative, undertake the journey to our place; and there is no time to send another message; in fact, there is no one reliable to be employed on

such a delicate mission. Rukmi makes boast that he will make me Sisupala's wife. And there seems to be no impediment to the execution of his wish. How unfortunate am I and how excruciating my misery ! Can I get relief and if so when ? I am in Your hands, O revered Devi, I pray for Your mercy, do not let me down."

Rukmini favoured loneliness; she would sit like 'patience on the monument.' But frayed nerves and disturbing thoughts made her gloomy, She would not open her bosom even to her own mother; she banished sleep; she cared little how she looked; she minded not the disarray into which her dress and ornaments fell; she would not touch food; nor would she quench her thirst. She had no inclination to bathe; to smear her body with scented unguents or to dress her tresses with flowers or to put on fine apparel, appeared a superfluous occupation. Pleasures and pastimes lost their glamour; the company of close friends appeared an insufferable infliction. Life itself lost its savour. Hot tears of grief flowed down in a stream as she glued herself to the window, stretching her looks in the direction of Dwaraka in fond expectancy of her lover's expeditious approach. Though bogged to neck in despondency, she did not give up hoping against hope. All on a sudden, she experienced a pronounced twitch simultaneously in her left eye, left shoulder and left thigh. This was a clear, auspicious sign forecasting something good happening to her in the immediate future. She breathed a sigh of relief. Lo and behold, there appeared before her the learned Brahmin who returned from Dwaraka with Krishna's response to her appeal. He gladdened Rukmini's heart by saying that Krishna praised her excellences and arrived there, determined to capture her and make her his wife; even if all the celestials and demons marshalled a combined force against him, they could not thwart his purpose. It was a cheerful heart-warming response and Rukmini was mightily pleased with it. She expressed her gratitude to Agnidyota : "Revered Sire, how can I repay your kindness ? You have taken the trouble of going to Dwaraka for my sake; you have conveyed my submission to Krishna; you have brought him here; it is your mercy in rendering me this favour

that has revived me, a dying maiden. I owe you a debt that is irrepayable; O pious and kind Brahmin, please accept my humble salutations."

On coming to know that Krishna and Balarama deigned to visit his kingdom, in response to his invitation to his daughter's wedding, Bhishmaka advanced towards them with his counsellors and received them with royal honours and led them to a mansion provided with all amenities, suitable to distinguished guests. The citizens of the capital heard of Krishna's arrival; curiosity drove them to pay their respects to him; they were charmed by his magnetic personality and came to the conclusion that he and their princess would make an excellent couple, for they seemed to match so well. They expressed that they would feel blessed if Brahma in his wisdom brought about their marital alliance.

It was time for Rukmini to proceed to the shrine of Gauri. Dressed in white and accompanied by married women and wives of Vedic scholars, Rukmini reached the shrine, her heart set upon the feet of Lord Krishna. She offered worship to the Divine Mother, sprinkled on Her flowers, sandal paste and rice smeared with turmeric paste; burnt incense and scented sticks and camphor before Her, and prostrated at Her feet invoking Her gracious blessings. Rukmini hailed the Divine Mother and said that none who put faith in Her ever suffered disappointment and prayed that She would mercifully vouchsafe fulfilment of her cherished wish and make her the wife of Lord Krishna. Rukmini then honoured the ladies accompanying her with gifts of sweets, flowers, fruits, betel leaves and spices etc., and received their blessings.

As Rukmini left the shrine, she seemed to be a flash of lightning emerging from a cloud; she looked like Mohini projected on to the stage from the rear curtain; she dazzled like Lakshmi as she sprang out of the Milky Ocean during churning operations. As she paced forward her gait had the grace of the swans. [Unable to bear the burden of her heavy bosom, her slender waist looked wan and shaken, compelling the bride to stretch her hand and seek support on

her companion's shoulder. With her blooming cheeks brightened by her diamond ear-studs, with her smooth curly forelocks playing on her lotus-face, with her gentle smiles radiating mellow light around, with her delicate lower lip spreading coral sparks about, with her upper garment's flying frill wafting like Cupid's flag, with her bejewelled waist-band emitting forth sparks like Devendra's bow, with her loving glances, getting metamorphosed into Cupid's sharp bolts, breaking the hearts of the heroic princes assembled there, Rukmini moved forward like a valiant Mohini, the bells of her anklets sounding pleasant and keeping rhythm with her steps. She was marking time, anticipating Krishna's arrival.

The princes assembled in the capital were astonished at the entrancing vision of great beauty and grace; that was Rukmini. Her sweet smiles and subtle side-glances paralysed the onlookers. The princes found their minds straying; they lost their nerve; they realised that their powers and sensibilities were deserting them; they lost control over themselves. They dropped their weapons. They dismounted their chariots and elephants and horses. As they stood on the ground astounded and petrified, Rukmini raised her eyes, brushed aside her wavy curls from her forehead and cast her lovely glances surveying the assemblage. There she noticed Krishna, the Enchanter of the whole world : his body glowed like sapphire; his eyes were soft lotus-petals; his chest was broad and majestic; his hands were strong and tough like elephant's trunks; his neck was shaped like a conch; he wore a purple silk; he was decked with dazzling ornaments. Rukmini was filled with ecstasy. The lover whom she fancied so dearly appeared in reality to excel all her fond expectations in his charms. She moved towards him and showed eagerness to mount his chariot. Krishna sprang before her, lifted her into the chariot, while all the princes looked on in wonder. He blew his conch announcing his capture of the bride, and majestically drove in the direction of Dwaraka. Balabhadra and the Yadava hosts followed him with triumphant cries of jubilation.

It was only on hearing the shouts of victory that Jaraasandha and his comrades realised what had happened

before their very eyes. Their self-esteem as warriors was touched to the quick; they reacted at once, they thought it derogatory to their dignity if they failed to free the Princess from the clutches of Krishna and the other Yadavas, for whose martial strength they had nothing but contempt. They feared that if they remained inactive they would invite the ridicule of the world upon themselves. They bestirred themselves, they armed themselves with potent weapons, summoned the armies and went in pursuit of the Yadavas. Jaraasandha challenged the Yadavas to stop and give fight, if they dared. Krishna and Balarama accepted the challenge and their hosts raised their bows and fitted arrows to them, ready to clash with the enemies. Rukmini was struck with fear and looked imploringly at Krishna; he assured her that his warriors would presently put to rout all the forces ranged against them. In the fight that followed, Balarama and other chieftains roared like thunder and smashed the enemies with tremendous fury. The battlefield presented a ghastly spectacle; it was strewn with broken chariots, wounded and dead elephants and horses; corpses and weapons lay scattered over the field; groans of the dying and wounded soldiers rent the air; blood flowed and drenched the ground; a great confusion prevailed with cries of mutual challenges, with the din of neighing of horses and the trumpetings of tuskers, and the blare of conchs and drums. The Yadavas proved their mettle; and Jaraasandha and his cohorts, Sisupala, Dantavakra, Salwa and others, could not withstand the onslaught; they had to retreat crest-fallen. Jaraasandha found Sisupala crumbling with fatigue, breathing hard and feeling miserable as one who had lost his wife. He congratulated him upon his escape from death at the enemy's hands. He consoled him that he should not grieve over the loss of Rukmini and that he could expect to find a more handsome bride in course of time. He observed that no human being was completely independent and free; that he was subject to a higher power which decreed success or defeat, joy or sorrow. He recalled how he had invaded Mathura twenty seven times and met with dismal defeat; and having been mercifully released by Krishna, he collected twenty three battalions and renewed the raids with aggressive vigour and scored successive triumphs

eighteen times. It would be unwise to gloat over success or grieve over defeat. Providence, in the present instance, was evidently in Krishna's favour; and even if all the kings mounted a combined attack with Siva at their head, they would meet with an inglorious defeat.

Jaraasandha concluded with the suggestion that they would get an opportunity to avenge this defeat when time turned propitious for them. The other princes tendered similar advice and pulled Sisupala out of the bog of despair and misery : All of them nursed a common grouse against Krishna and left for their respective kingdoms.

But Rukmi could not digest the disgrace. Krishna's forcible abduction of his sister rankled in his mind. He foolishly thought that where his staunch friends failed, he would succeed. Swollen with arrogance and overconfidence in his own prowess and driven by hurt pride and vengeful retaliation, he went with his armies chasing the culprit. He had little appreciation of the eminence of Krishna as warrior. He dismissed him with contempt as a rustic, a cowherd, and a thief of cheese and butter; and declared that it would take no time to crush him. He challenged Krishna to stay for a while and struck him with three sharp shafts and hurled defiance at him : "How dare you capture my sister and carry her off? How can you claim parity with us? What is your status? To which royal house do you belong? Where were you born and where were you brought up? Who could testify to your descent? You are an uncivilised bumpkin with no honour, with no morality, with no refinement. You are a cheat, you move not without a mask. You are no sovereign king who can openly lead his forces against his enemies. And yet, you are headstrong and presumptuous enough to carry off Princess Rukmini. Be warned, release my sister at once. If you do not, you will come to grief. My fiery shafts will smash your pride and lay you low." Krishna smiled in response to all this bravado and bluster and got ready for the fight. With agility and deftness which beggared description, Krishna released arrows in quick succession : With one bolt he broke Rukmi's bow; with six shafts he pierced his body; with eight arrows he killed the horses

harnessed to the chariot; with two more shafts he eliminated the charioteer; and with three sharp arrows he blasted the flag. Rukmi pressed into action various other weapons, spears, tridents, maces, clubs, discs etc., and Krishna smashed them to pieces midway with his own missiles. Enraged at the ineffectiveness of his efforts, Rukmi became desperate; he rushed at Krishna with his flaming sword, little realising that his venture was similar to the locusts's jumping into wood-fire. Krishna had no difficulty in slashing the enemy's sword and armour into smithereens. He gave vent to his pent-up feeling of resentment as he jumped forward with a threat that he would cut off Rukmi's head.

Rukmini intervened at the nick of the moment. She fell at Krishna's feet and implored his mercy. She readily admitted that her brother's entire conduct was highly repulsive and that he deserved the extreme punishment for it. Her concern was about her parents. They felt exceptionally fortunate in that the Lord of the universe had chosen to become their son-in-law. But if Krishna carried out his threat, their bliss would be displaced by intense grief for their son's death. It was only to save them from that bitter gnawing sorrow, that she made a fervent appeal for his mercy. As she craved for his pity, Rukmini presented a heart-rending picture. Her body trembled with fear; her voice turned hoarse; gloom covered her face; her tresses fell into disarray; bitter tears of grief streamed down her cheeks; she was Niobe, all tears. She fell at Krishna's feet praying for mercy. Krishna relented. Rage yielded place to humour. He would not kill him; he would only disfigure him. Addressing him as 'dear cousin', he bound him and with a smile lit on his face, he tonsured clean half of his crown with a single swathe of his sword; in a similar exercise, he shaved half of his beard and half of his mustache. Balabhadra and Yadava heroes returned just then after putting to flight the enemy hordes. Balabhadra was unhappy with what his brother had done to Rukmi. He freed Rukmi from the bands and gently reprimanded Krishna, telling him that it was improper to dishonour close relatives and disfiguring the son of Bhishmaka was worse than putting him to death. He wondered how

Krishna, who maintained an equable temper towards all, without favouring friends or harming enemies, gave quarter to this vicious idea in his mind. Rukmi was set free; but he was consumed with a sense of painful humiliation and shame. Returning home in that disfigured condition was out of the question. No. He would not enter Kundinapura until after he scored a victory over Krishna.

Balabhadra then addressed words of comfort and counsel to Rukmini to assuage her misery. "Be pleased to forget your brother's discomfiture. No offence is meant against you. Do not attach blame to our Krishna for this sad occurrence. All living beings are governed by their past deeds; and your brother has suffered as a consequence thereof. Good or ill, joy or sorrow, flow as results of past Karma; to praise or curse anyone for those experiences is sheer ignorance. To kill a person who deserves to be killed is an obligation for kings; to let him off on consideration of kinship is a clear deflection from duty; but to kill a person who is as good as dead is indeed superfluous. Moved by inordinate ambition, a brother does not hesitate to turn wicked and perpetrate harm even to his sister. With hearts set on acquisition of land or accumulation of wealth, or expansion of power or elevation of status and extensiveness of influence, greedy and ambitious people do not hesitate to adopt despicable methods and commit atrocious crimes against righteous and virtuous folk. Listen. Men whose vision is circumscribed by worldly interests demarcate people into three categories — friends, enemies and neither friends nor enemies. Such distinction is an illusion. For, the soul which is real is one; it indwells all. But it *appears* to be many in the same way as the one sun appears to be many when reflected in water and other transparent media. It appears that the soul (*atma*) remains dormant and static, while the body and the senses and the mind appear active and dynamic. Birth and death, growth and decline, union and separation pertain to the body and not to the soul. It is sheer ignorance to attach importance to the unreal world of change. So it is upto you, Rukmini, to dispel ignorance with the light of knowledge and give up sorrow." Thus enlightened, Rukmini gained strength to overcome grief

and regain peace and cheer. It is worthwhile, in this context, to note how sensitive and tender the heart of a woman is and how gracious and magnanimous she can be towards those who have been hostile to her. It was Rukmi who forced an unwilling alliance on his sister; and it was to frustrate his design that Rukmini sought Krishna's intervention. Quick to forget and forgive his hostility, it was Rukmini again who saved her brother from death by imploring the victor's pity with a heart-rending appeal.

The citizens of Dwaraka were agog with excitement and ecstasy that their lord had routed the Princes and their hosts and was returning home with his precious capture, a divine damsel of exquisite charms and outstanding virtues. They made elaborate arrangements to beautify the town; they turned out in large numbers to accord a jubilant reception to the lord and his lady-love. They were seized by a spirit of gay abandon. They admired the couple and wished them all happiness. It was an auspicious occasion of unique joy when Krishna's marriage was solemnised with Rukmini — the gentle amiable lady, of shining beauty and virtue, the source of wealth and affluence and the bestower of generous gifts and benefactions, the light of the home and the purveyor of love, universally admired and adored. Kings of Kekaya, Vidarbha, Kunti, Kuru and Srunjaya who had elose affinities with the Yadus, rejoiced and participated in the celebrations. Rich tributes and offerings poured in from all quarters. The people deemed their King and Queen as Lord Vishnu and Sri Lakshmi and rendered them reverential attention and service. The union of the Divine Spouses augured peace and prosperity to the entire universe.

May their grace abound and their blessings ever abide !

Swasthi

Lokas samsthat sukhino bhavantu

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